

CONTEXTUALIZATION:
A KEY TO EFFECTIVE PREACHING AMONG THE
YORUBA OF NIGERIA

A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of the
Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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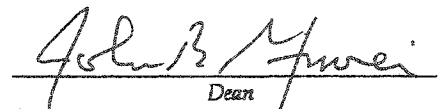
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ABSTRACT

Contextualization: A Key to Effective Preaching among the Yoruba of Nigeria

by

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Contextualization has been a major theological pursuit in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. This concern is born out of the necessity to integrate Christianity into African life and culture. Although the concept has taken root in theology, liturgy, and missiology in Nigeria, its heuristic significance for preaching remains unexplored. This is largely due to over-dependence on the western missionary-form of preaching. Beginning with the premise that preaching is meaningful and more effective when it is rooted in the context of the audience, this project explores how contextualization could enhance the practice of preaching among the Yoruba of Nigeria.

The project combines library research and analysis of contextual sermon samples to underscore the underlying thesis. Literature used includes theological and homiletical writings of both foreign and African scholars. The four sermon samples draw on the writer's twelve years of preaching experience in different parts of Yorubaland.

Chapter 1 introduces and delineates the nature and scope of the project. The second chapter examines the traditional context of Yoruba people by tracing the origin and describing the traditional worldview of the people. While acknowledging the vast diversity of Yorubaland, the chapter presumes some commonality among Yoruba people. In Chapter 3, the variety of preaching practices in Yorubaland are presented and analyzed. Specific attention is paid to preaching practices in the pre-Christian era, European missionary period, mainline churches, Indigenous churches, and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. Chapter 4

discusses the theoretical underpinning of the project by examining the theological movement and homiletical implications of contextualization. Chapter 5 concretizes the thesis of the project by analyzing four sermon samples that are designed to embody the Yoruba context, and the concluding chapter summarizes the key points of the project.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this project is that in spite of the widespread nature of Christianity in Yorubaland, there is an enduring dissonance between faith commitment and lived experience that, among other things, finds expression among some Yoruba Christians in Nigeria who often recourse to traditional practices when they encounter personal or family crises; indicating that Christian understanding and practice have yet to be adequately rooted into Yoruba cultural values and spiritual worldview.

Importance of the Problem

The motivation for the project emanates from three interrelated sources. The first source is a well-known traditional Yoruba song.

Awa o s'oro ile wa o,
Awa o s'oro ile wa o,
Igbagbo o pe, o ye,
Igbagbo o pe k'awa ma s'oro
Awa o s'oro ile wa o.

We shall perform our ancestral rituals.
Oh yes, we shall perform our ancestral rituals!
Christianity does not preclude us from doing it,
We shall perform our ancestral rituals.

I grew up, as a Yoruba man, hearing my forebears singing this traditional song with passion and enthusiasm during traditional festivals. Regardless of the overwhelming affirmation of Christianity in Yorubaland, the song provides an insight into the mindset of Yoruba people who hold tenaciously to their traditional religion and culture and perform traditional rituals with joy and expectancy. For them, no religion, not even Christianity, can obfuscate ancient

religiocultural ways that have formed them and proved dependable in times of trouble.

Admittedly, it is rather tenuous to conclude, based on this phenomenon, that Christianity is utterly ineffective among the Yoruba in times of life challenges. But the persistence of traditional religion and culture presents an ongoing challenge to Christianity in terms of capturing and infusing the entire consciousness of the people.

My personal experience provides the second impetus for writing the project.

Personally, I experienced dissonance between my avowed Christian faith and Yoruba cultural identity for many years. I was born into a Christian family, and right from childhood, I applied myself to Christian teachings and practices. I experienced spiritual conversion as an adolescent and was subsequently confirmed into full membership in Methodist Church Nigeria. Yet I continually felt a great void and lived an ambivalent spiritual life for a number of years. Out of sheer frustration and dissatisfaction with church activities, I ventured into several Yoruba religious practices. As I later realized, my problem stemmed from the differences between my Christian faith and Yoruba identity. I noticed that my Christian faith, rooted in the European Wesleyan tradition, was opposed to my “Yorubanness,” and therefore did not address my entire being.

This assumption on my part was reinforced during my pastorate among the Yoruba of Nigeria. This constitutes the third motivation for the project. In my twelve years pastorate among churches in Nigeria, I observed many Yoruba Christians vacillating between Christian faith and traditional belief and practices. It appears that while affirming the Christian faith most of the time, many Yoruba Christians tend to turn to traditional remedies in times of personal or family crisis. Perhaps, this is why the late Nigerian elder statesman, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, wrote:

Christian and Moslem beliefs and practices are, with many Nigerian, nothing but veneers and social facades: at heart and in the privacy of their lives, most Nigerian Christians and Moslems are heathens and animists.¹

Much as they might want to deny it at times, this “double conscious” dilemma is apparent in many people regardless of social status.² While Christianity is widespread among the Yoruba, it has not addressed all their deep cultural, spiritual, and emotional needs and traditional practices such that divination and healing practices persist in Yorubaland even though Christianity expressly forbids them. It could, therefore, be argued that Christianity among the Yoruba provided only one layer of engagement as the deeper spiritual sub-stratum of the people was “hardly touched and found its way back to consciousness in moments of storm and stress.”³

When Christianity came to Yorubaland it encountered a civilized people immersed in a well-developed religion that recognized the Christian God as their Supreme Being.⁴ But the early missionaries, and later the missionary-trained indigenous leaders of mainline churches disparaged the people’s cultural values and spiritual worldview. They considered the traditional ethos paganism, demonic, and incapable of expressing the divine essence of the Christian God and proclaimed the Christian gospel in Western cultural garb. This

¹ Cited in Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 7. Awolowo’s point is cogent regardless of the archaic terminologies he used to denote African Traditional Religion. Although the terms “heathens” and “animists” were in vogue in 1960 when Awolowo wrote his piece, they are no longer acceptable today. The terminologies are not only primitive but also erroneous, pejorative, and inappropriate, as they do not truly reflect the essence of African Traditional Religion. For a seminal book on this issue see Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

² For the purpose of this study, the term “double conscious” refers to a situation whereby many Yoruba Christians consciously subscribe to Christian doctrines and maintain intact their traditional customs simultaneously. As would be made clearer later in the project, this situation is pervasive in Yorubaland and has put a question mark on the quality and sincerity of the Yoruba Christian profession and practices.

³ Akinyele J. Omoyajowo, *Religion, Society, and the Home* (Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, Nigeria: Vicco International Press, 2001), 42.

⁴ Wande Abimbola, “The Place of African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa: The Yoruba Example,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: International Religious Foundation, distributed by Paragon House, 1991), 52.

imperialistic preaching is what seems to have created the enduring dissonance between faith commitment and lived experience of Yoruba people.

This apparent disconnect raises some pointed questions that have haunted me through the years. The questions include: (1) What is the value of religious teachings that discredit a people's way of life? (2) Given that Christianity has come to stay in Yorubaland, is it possible to preach the gospel through the lens of Yoruba worldview? (3) How can this be done so as to achieve a unified worldview between the Christian faith and the lived experience of the Yoruba of Nigeria?

Unless these questions are addressed, it appears many Yoruba will continue to live ambivalent spiritual lives. This phenomenon has motivated diverse scholarly research into ways of making Christianity more relevant and indigenous to Africans in general and Nigerians in particular. But the effort is incomplete, as preaching has not been given a deserving attention. This project, therefore, seeks to occupy the void by contributing a preaching perspective to the ongoing interdisciplinary attempt to contextualize Christianity in Yorubaland.

The current trends of Biblical interpretation, liberation and contextual theologies provide an important starting point for such a quest. My exposure to these developments has helped me realize that Christian preaching could be more meaningful and useful when it is rooted in the people's cultural and spiritual expressions. This understanding is based on the fact that all preaching is local and sensitive preachers herald the gospel as Good News for the immediate audience.⁵ This, therefore, makes adequate valuing of the audience's worldview requisite to effective preaching. As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale claims, complete immersion into

⁵ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 37.

the world of the audience will enable preachers to locate their sermons within a specific faith community or group of people rather than anchoring sermons on generic human experience.⁶

To a large extent, preaching in Yorubaland has not attempted to appropriate the Yoruba cultural values and spiritual worldview. Both past and present preaching paradigms in Yorubaland remain, by and large, in a state of missionary captivity. A significant amount of preaching simply follows the nineteenth century European missionary pattern, which communicates the gospel in Western cultural trappings. Regardless of the large-scale adoption of Christianity in Yorubaland, many preachers, especially in mission established churches, are simply unaware of contextual preaching as a viable approach to bridging the gap between the biblical text and the world of the audience. Moreover, many preachers consider traditional cultures and religion incompatible with Biblical proclamation. This is no surprise because the very phrase “traditional culture and religion” often evokes a negative response, and any engagement is readily labeled syncretism, a practice that is regarded as compromising the supra-cultural status of the gospel.⁷ There is no gainsaying that this neglect or outright disregard for the religiocultural values of the people has contributed to the enduring chasm between the gospel and the reality of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. This is to be expected, as Thomas Long implies, because it is impossible to impose a useful and meaningful gospel message on the people from outside. Long writes: “preaching does not occur in thin air but always happens on a specific occasion and with particular people in a given cultural setting.”⁸ For this reason, Bolaji Idowu asserts: “For successful evangelism as well as the edification of the church, it is necessary for the preacher to put himself in the

⁶ Tisdale, 12.

⁷ Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1985), 23-31.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 29.

position of his hearers, 'sit where they sit,' and thus interpret God to them in terms which they will grasp."⁹ Really, effective preaching calls for the recognition of the "specific occasion" and deliberate incorporation of the fundamental ethos of the people.

In this connection, this project will contribute to at least four goals. First, it will encourage Yoruba preachers to reclaim the Yoruba heritage as a significant source for effective proclamation of the gospel. Second, by advocating the use of Yoruba traditional worldview in preaching the project will affirm the Yoruba cultural identity, which was substantially eroded by intrusive missionary efforts and cultural imperialism of the colonial era. Third, as indicated earlier, the project will contribute a preaching voice to the ongoing efforts to contextualize Christianity in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general. Lastly, although the project focuses primarily on the Yoruba, it will provide a model of contextual preaching which may be helpful in other cultural contexts. Thus, ultimately encourage other African preachers to use their respective cultural and spiritual heritage as a veritable vehicle for preaching God's grace to empower African Christians as they face the many challenges of life.

Thesis

This project will utilize selected aspects of Yoruba culture to integrate the gospel and the Yoruba religiocultural worldview in order to bridge the existing gap between the Christian faith and the Yoruba experiences with a view to empowering Yoruba Christians as they face the challenges of life.

⁹ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 18.

Work Previously Done in the Field

Contextualization has been an enduring concern in theology and ministry practices. The concern is as old as Christianity itself.¹⁰ As Christianity emerged from its Jewish origin into the Greco-Roman world, the early church fathers utilized Greek and Roman philosophical concepts to speak of the gospel to the immediate audience.¹¹ For instance, St. Augustine echoes the issue as early as fifth century when he instructs teachers/preachers to adapt their teaching/preaching to the context of the audience.¹²

In more recent times, the issue received impetus when in the 1950s H. Richard Niebuhr examined the relevance of the gospel to diverse cultural situations that Christians live in. In *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr provided five dynamic relations between the gospel and culture to show the numerous attitudes Christians have taken toward culture over time.¹³

Paul Tillich also addressed the effect of culture in Christian theology. In *Theology of Culture*, Tillich analyzes approaches to the communication of the gospel and submits that the gospel is better communicated through preachers' involvement in the listeners' contexts.¹⁴ Even though Tillich acknowledges that culture is integral to the communication of the gospel, he disregards individual experience and cultural particularities. Based on the assumption that all human beings "participate in human existence," Tillich emphasizes common human nature as the locus of the gospel.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ruy O Costa, ed., *One Faith, Many Cultures: Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization*, Boston Theological Institutes 2, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 4.

¹¹ See Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

¹² Augustine, *The First Catechetical Instruction*, trans. Joseph P. Christopher, *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 2, (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1946), 49-10.

¹³ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 201-13.

¹⁵ Tillich, 202.

As in other parts of the world, contextualization of theology has been a major theological orientation in Africa since the 1950s. The movement emerged as an attempt to create authentic African theology and mission approaches.¹⁶ It was a conscious engagement of European Christian thinking and African religious thought in dialogue for the purpose of integrating Christianity into the life and culture of the Africans.

Placide Temples, a Belgian Franciscan missionary in Zaire in the 1930s, pioneered what is today known as African theology.¹⁷ He is acknowledged for his *Bantu Philosophy* in French-speaking Africa.¹⁸ Although the book, a product of a non-African author, has been criticized for its patronizing and colonial attitude, it is regarded as a handmaid to African theology. It lays out many ideas Temple addressed in his catechetical and pastoral reflections. Temples' work forged the adaptation approach to African theology, which V. Mulago, a one time Kinshasa Catholic Theological Faculty, adopted in *Un visage africain du christianisme*. Mulago argues that effective evangelization requires an understanding of the

¹⁶ See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ African Theology is one of two major theological movements in Africa today. It is concerned with synthesizing European Christian thinking and African religious thought with the aim of presenting Christianity in a way that is relevant to African's view of reality so as to help Africans live out Christian faith authentically within their cultural milieu. The other theological trend is Black or Liberation Theology, which addresses the sociopolitical transformation of the condition of inequality and oppression in Africa. While each of the two trends has its unique focus, they are not mutually exclusive because they are both concerned with how Africa/Africans will experience freedom and wholeness in the midst of sociopolitical and religious colonization and oppression. According to Desmond Tutu, both theologies form a series of concentric circles of which Black theology is the inner and the smaller circle. This means that the two foci interrelate and complement one another. See Desmond Tutu, "Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists?," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987), 54. For detailed discussion on trends in African theologies see Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres eds., *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of the Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1993); Rosino Gibellini, ed., *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1994); and Kwame Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 3, no. 2 (June 1996): 1-9.

¹⁸ Placide Temples, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959).

people's culture and philosophy, which will generate comparable elements through which the gospel is "engraved" on the souls of the people.¹⁹

Charles Nyamiti, a Catholic priest from Tanzania, attempted a systematic approach to African theology in several of his writings. He defined African theology as "neither a new religious doctrine, nor a sort of syncretism between Christian teaching and African religious beliefs, but the very self-same Catholic doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with African mentality and needs."²⁰ Basically, his method consists of using African philosophy to present Christian doctrine.

The Kenyan John S. Mbiti is, without a doubt, one of the most outstanding Protestant theologians in the field of African theology. His theological writings cover both pastoral and biblical studies. Working within the Protestant tradition, Mbiti adopted a radical methodology by juxtaposing Christian concepts with African concepts of God and showed how the one is verified in the other.²¹

Like Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, a religious scholar and late Patriarch of Methodist Church Nigeria, advocated for the indigenization of Christian theology and liturgy in Africa. He blamed the spiritual emptiness of churches in Africa on the gullible importation of European "prefabricated liturgies" to Africa and suggested the use of African history and oral literatures such as phraseology, songs, proverbs, myths, and symbol in Christian theology

¹⁹ V. Mulago, *Un visage africain du christianisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965).

²⁰ Charles Nyamiti, *The Way to Christian Theology for Africa* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba, n.d.), 1.

²¹ John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970). His other major related works include *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor, 1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London: SPCK, 1975); and *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1986).

and liturgy as way of redressing the situation.²² In *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Idowu expressly demonstrates how Yoruba belief in God is one and the same with Christian doctrine of God.²³

John S. Pobee, a Protestant theologian in University of Ghana, is a major contemporary voice in contextualization of theology in Africa. In *Toward an African Theology*, Pobee described the task of African theology as that of “translating” Christianity into authentic African categories.

Like Mbiti and Idowu, Douglas Makhathini, a Lutheran theologian from South Africa, also emphasized the use of African indigenous religious elements in Christian theology. For him, and in consonance with his Lutheran tradition, African theology is biblical reflection expressed in African categories.²⁴ Although his theology is not so popular in South Africa, due to the overwhelming presence of Black Theology, his contribution does not go unnoticed.

Following closely in the paths of African theologians and religious scholars, many African missiologists are beginning to explore the implications of contextualization in evangelism and mission. Some of the major African contemporary figures that have embraced this view include Chukwuma Iroezi, Mogens Mogensen, Vincent Nwampka, Njenga Kariuki, and Paul O. Gaggawala. Relative to the ongoing issue in missiology, each of

²² Bolaji Idowu, “The Predicament of the Church in Africa,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. C. G. Baeta (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 433- 35; and Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*. See also Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, xi

²³ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Publishers, 1962).

²⁴ Douglas Makhathini, “Black Theology,” in *Relevant Theology for Africa: A Report on a Consultation of the Missiological Institute at Lutheran Theological College, Mapulumo, Natal, September 12-23, 1972*, ed. Hans-Jurgen Becken (Durban, Natal: Lutheran Pub. House for the Missiological Institute of L.T.C., 1973), 8-17.

these African missiologists tried to explore how Christianity can be culturally relevant to diverse African people, while remaining faithful to the supra-cultural status of the Gospel.²⁵

While contextualization has been applied to theology and missiology in different parts of Africa, its heuristic significance has not been fully explored in the preaching context. African homiletics have yet to discover the vast resources of African traditional religions and cultures in the shaping of sermons.

One contemporary homileticsian who has since recognized the significance of contextualization in preaching is the Zimbabwean evangelism scholar, John Wesley Kurewa. His work emerges from the “strange ways” of ministry and church life he observed among Africans.²⁶ He writes against the cultural and self-alienation many Africans experience regarding their traditional ways as a result of meddling missionary efforts mixed with cultural imperialism. Kurewa argues that the increasing cultural awareness in Africa has exposed the ineffectiveness of the dominant western preaching paradigm to address the African’s total being since it belittles African cultural values and experiences. In this connection, authentic African preaching, Kurewa submits, has to “use preaching as an instrument that will invite the African church once more to take a closer look at our African culture as God-given.”²⁷ Such contextual approach has to be “Afrocentric”, seeking to

²⁵ See Chukwuma Jude Iroez, “Igbo Worldview and the Communication of the Gospel,” (D. Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1981); Mogens Stensbaek Mogensen, “Contextual Communication of the Gospel to Pastoral Fulbe in Northern Nigeria,” (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2000); Vincent Onyeguchi Nwankpa, “The Word and World in Africa: Contextualization among the Igbo of Nigeria,” (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997); Njenga Kariuki, “Inculturation of the Gospel among the Agikuyu of Kenya,” (D. Miss. diss., United Theological Seminary, 2001); and Paul O Gaggawala, *Fully Christian, Fully Human: A Model for the New Evangelization* (Boca Raton, Fla.: Jeremiah Press, 1999). For the ongoing issue of contextualization in missiology, see Dana Robert, *Evangelism as the Heart of Mission*, Mission Evangelism Series, no. 1 (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, 1997), 5.

²⁶ John Wesley Zwomunondiita Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity: Proclaiming the Gospel in Africa* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 9.

²⁷ Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity*, 11.

“uncover and use codes, paradigm, symbols, motifs, myths, and circles of discussion that reinforce the centrality of African ideals and values as valid frame” for preaching.²⁸ This has great potentials for making preaching more authentic and effective in Africa.

Admittedly, Kurewa’s work resonates with the problem this project sets out to address insofar as it grapples with the integration of the gospel into Africans’ religiocultural consciousness. However, this project has different study group from Kurewa. Although African communities and states share extensive religiocultural affinity, they are different in many ways. Therefore, unlike Kurewa’s work, which focuses primarily on the Shona people of Zimbabwe, this project seeks to construct a contextual preaching paradigm that is rooted primarily in a Yoruba religiocultural context.

Scope and Limitation of the Project

This project focuses mainly on contextualization of preaching among the Yoruba of Nigeria. While occasion may warrant reference to other Nigerian tribes, the project is limited to the Yoruba people. It uses the religiocultural contexts of the Yoruba to proclaim the gospel in ways that address the entire being of the people.

Three important issues are to be borne in mind regarding the nature of the project. First, the project is suggestive in that it only contains my emerging understanding of contextual preaching among the Yoruba. It is, in this regard, not designed to reflect or measure people’s responses to the preaching paradigm presented here. Second, the project is not exhaustive of the subject matter as it is limited to the religiocultural aspect of Yoruba people. Third, in the absence of substantial literature on contextual preaching in Yorubaland, the project represents a kind of pioneer effort and seeks to initiate and generate genuine

²⁸ For the goal of Afrocentrist see Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton, N. J.: African World Press, 1990), 3.

conversation among Yoruba pastors in ministry around the question of contextualization in preaching in Yorubaland.

Procedure for Integration

The project combines practical suggestions for contextualization in preaching with contextual perspective from theology, missiology, biblical, and cultural studies. In doing this, two different research designs are used. The first tool and substantial part of the project is based on library research. I engage theological and preaching texts that call attention to contextualization by drawing especially on the works of Bolaji Idowu, Leonora Tisdale, and Stephen Bevans. The work of these scholars helps to highlight the problem of the project and to formulate the theoretical framework of contextualization in preaching. The second aspect of the research, which is the procedure for integration, is the crafting and analyzing of sermon samples. Here, I prepare and analyze four sermon samples that embody the essential ethos of the Yoruba to demonstrate contextualization in preaching that takes the Yoruba context seriously.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 introduces the project by stating its thesis and discussing the problem, importance, and work previously done in the field. The purpose of the chapter is to identify the field of study and set the stage for subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 presents the Yoruba in context. It examines the traditional context of the people, discusses their origin, sociopolitical structure, cultural ethos, and beliefs systems. The aim is to underline the basic assumptions and philosophical thoughts that inform and shape the identity of Yoruba people.

The variety of preaching from the pre-Christian era to the present in Yorubaland is examined in Chapter 2. The history is presented through the framework of the development of Christianity in Nigeria with the purpose of showing the assumptions, strengths, and inadequacies of each preaching approach and as a way of arguing for the necessity of contextualization of preaching among the Yoruba.

Chapter 4 explores the theory of contextualization by defining the term and discussing its theological movement and homiletical implications. The purpose here is to outline the significance and principles of contextualization in preaching.

Chapter 5 analyzes four sermon samples that attempt to integrate the gospel and some aspects of Yoruba cultural values and worldview with a view to showing how contextualization in preaching takes the context of a people very seriously.

The project concludes with a summary and some suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

THE YORUBA IN CONTEXT

This chapter examines the origin, sociopolitical systems, cultural ethos, belief system, and religious thought and worldview of Yoruba people. The purpose is to introduce the reader to the religiocultural context of the Yoruba of Nigeria as well as to provide some vital sources for contextualization of the gospel in Yorubaland.

The Origin of the Yoruba

No direct information or evidence exists about the origin of the Yoruba owing to lack of written record about the people before the middle of the nineteenth century. A great deal of what is known about the early history of the people is deduced from oral traditions, myths, and legends.¹ Although much speculation and lack of consensus abound on the issue, Samuel Johnson observes: “we can do not more than relate the traditions which have been universally accepted.”² Among these traditions are various accounts of the origin of Yoruba people.

The view most commonly held by a good number of Yoruba people, originates from a creation myth. The myth claims that the Yoruba originated from *Ile-Ife*, an ancient city in western Nigeria. “Most Yoruba people,” Idowu states “refer themselves back in tradition to *Ile-Ife* as their original home.”³ The myth names the ancient city of *Ile-Ife* as both the center of the world and the cradle of human race. It is the primal creation on earth; the location where *Olodumare* or *Olurun* (God) starts to create and represents the beginning and ultimate

¹ Samuel O. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Westport, Conn.: Negro University Press, 1970), 3.

² Johnson, 3.

³ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 14-15.

end of all creatures. The myth further claims *Oduduwa* as the people's primal ancestor.⁴ This is why many Yoruba proudly call themselves *Omọ Oduduwa* (children of Oduduwa).⁵ It also helps to explain why many Yoruba not only hold Ile-Ife in such high esteem but also look upon it as their ancestral homestead (*orisun* or *orirun*). Nevertheless, the quest for Yoruba origin remains elusive.

Some scholars have attempted to solve this question through scientific investigation. For example, many archaeologists are relentlessly excavating important sites across the land in search of artifacts that may shed some light on the situation. Much of the current discoveries have yet to corroborate the existing oral traditions or suggest credible alternatives. Even the famous Ife brass casting and terracotta artifact that was discovered at Ile-Ife in 1959 provide very little information other than the fact that the Yoruba are descendants of noble ancestry.

The Yoruba have fostered an identity that is well known in different parts of the world even though their origin remains obscure. Not only are they the most urbanized of the all sub-Saharan people, they are also descendants of noble ancestry with rich culture and traditions.⁶ Isichei is, therefore, right when she notes that the Yoruba are notable for "their corpus of oral literature; their sculptures in bronze, terracotta, and iron; their elaborate mask

⁴ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 15. There are different opinions regarding the identity of Oduduwa. While some claim that Oduduwa was the original ancestor and king-priest of Ile-Ife, others present him as a refraction of the Supreme Being (God). Oduduwa may be perceived as a god or goddess since both notions are found in Yorubaland. For details see Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 23-29; and J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 196.

⁵ There currently exists in Nigeria a pan-Yoruba sociocultural organization known as Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Society of the Descendants of Oduduwa) which exercises considerable influence in the country. See Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 296. I am highly indebted to Bolaji Idowu and J.D.Y. Peel whose books provided much of the information in this chapter.

⁶ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 5.

costumes; the intricacies of their system of government; their richness of religious life.”⁷ The Yoruba are a conglomeration of about twenty-five distinct subgroups. They occupy the southwestern part of Nigeria and constitute one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country along with the Hausa/Fulani in the north and the Igbo in the southeast.

The use of the term “Yoruba” to refer to these vast subgroups as a unified ethnic group is very late in history. Historical record shows that the Christian missionaries and linguists in the middle of nineteenth century gave the term a wider application even though it was initially applied to the Oyo, a subgroup located at the northwestern part of Yorubaland.⁸ This explains why the Oyo are still sometimes called “Yoruba proper” to differentiate them from other subgroups.⁹ Each subgroup was known by its tribal name prior to this period.

The foregoing indicates that the Yoruba have a long-standing civilization rooted in myths of origin, rich culture, and religiopolitical traditions that have attracted extensive scholarly writings over the years. Thus, the second part of this chapter takes a close look at some of these traits by discussing the essential elements of Yoruba sociopolitical system and religious worldview.

Sociopolitical System

The Yoruba social system is highly structured, hierarchical, and patrilineal. Every Yoruba person is born into a patrilineal clan (*Idile*) whose members descend from a remote common ancestor. An individual accepts all members of his/her clan as blood relatives even if s/he does not have the slightest idea of how they are related. Incestuous relationships are

⁷ Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 155.

⁸ See Peel, 283; and Jeremy Seymour Eades, *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2-4.

⁹ Eades, 4.

taboo and marriage with members of one's family is forbidden. Marriage is patrilocal and the bride lives in the compound of the groom's father. The social system leaves very little room for individual social existence and self-expression.

The traditional Yoruba society is divided into clan and sub-clan. Each clan or sub-clan consists of many nuclear families, with the eldest male member known as the *Bale* or *Baba Ile* (father of the house) usually being the head. The *Bale* performs numerous social responsibilities that include the maintenance of cordial relationships among the clan members, adjudicating internal disputes, assigning living quarters within the compound, administering the clan farmland, and presiding over the clan's ancestral worship. He also punishes anti-social behavior such as theft, incest, and adultery. In the absence of the *Bale* the assistant, usually the next senior male member of the clan performs all the duties expected of the *Bale*.

The clan remains foundational to Yoruba social system. Nevertheless, the autonomous town (*Ilu*) constitutes the basis of their political organization. Kòmólafẹ explains: "In view of the urbanized nature and because the political design of an *Ilu* depended on the strength of its *Ọba* (king), allegiance to a paramount chieftain often replaces traditional loyalties to the clan."¹⁰ The concept of *Ilu* is deeply embedded in Yoruba political structure and constitutes the pattern of urban life-style.

Each kingdom (*Ilu*) has a monarch who is usually the political and religious leader. In his political capacity, the monarch has overall power over the affairs of the kingdom, sets up

¹⁰ Sunday B. Kòmólafẹ, "The Transformation of African Ecclesiology: Development and Change in the Nigerian Church" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2004), 16. Kòmólafẹ and some other scholars prefer to use the term "king" for Yoruba *Ọbas*. It is my contention that this term does not sufficiently express the personage of Yoruba *Ọbas*. In my opinion, Yoruba *Ọbas* are monarchs as they command enormous power, authority, and divine attributes. In this regard, therefore, I prefer the term monarch to king.

policies that regulate domestic affairs, and represents the subjects in inter-kingdom affairs. He also performs religious functions by mediating between his subject and the deities (*Oriṣa*). Yoruba monarchs are not only powerful, they are generally considered sacred and their personage suffused with an aura of deep spirituality. This explains the appellation *ekeji oriṣa* (companion of the divinities) usually ascribed to them. The awe and divine attributes of the monarch conceals his personage and removes him from the people. He is in most cases represented by his title chiefs on political and social matters and by the chief diviner (*Babalawo*) on religious affairs.¹¹

Another formidable power block in Yoruba traditional political structure is the council of chiefs. While the monarch appoints the chiefs and removes any of them when occasion warrants such action, the council of chiefs appoints and coronates the monarch, confers with him on important issues affecting the kingdom, and checks his powers from misuse. In extreme cases, the council of chiefs could depose the monarch for political reasons, especially when his rule becomes unpopular among the people.¹² In this wise, the monarch and the council of chiefs serve as check and balance in the Yoruba political system.

One must not fail to point out the role of the secret society in the Yoruba political structure. Even though the monarch is the supreme head of the kingdom in all affairs, the secret society equally exercises enormous powers in governance. Kòmólafẹ́ states:

Secret societies were [*still are in some places*] valuable instruments of social control within the political system. Although they did not function as a central institution of government, they possessed clearly defined obligation for formalizing and enforcing community authority. They represented a political channel through which supernatural powers operated within the human

¹¹ Kòmólafẹ́, 17.

¹² William R. Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 31.

space...and their influence was reinforced by the strong religious and mystical sanctions they provoked.¹³

The secret societies command political and judicial powers on the populace, serve as advisory council to the monarch, and prevent the royalty as well as the council of chiefs from becoming tyrannical.¹⁴ Although there are local variations to this political structure, especially in the composition and functions of the chiefs and the secret societies, the abovementioned forms the core features of Yoruba traditional political system.

This sociopolitical system is currently in a state of flux due to the some obvious reasons. The advent of colonial rule, incursion and over stay of the Military in Nigerian politics, protracted political instability in the country, and exposure to foreign technology and ideology are some factors responsible for the changes. These factors are radically weakening the social fabric and undermining traditional institutions. While the monarchical institution subsists, its existence is more or less ceremonial, representing the relics of by-gone traditions. But in spite of these changes, the underlying ethos of the traditional system has profoundly shaped the identity of the people and continues to influence their perception of reality.

Cultural Ethos

The word ethos describes the fundamental character or the spirit of a culture, the underlying sentiment, or assumption that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a people. It represents the *gestalt*, and essence of a people's philosophy and self-identity. The cultural ethos of Yoruba people is embedded in community. Yoruba pulse is continually "beating to communal rhythms and communal fear."¹⁵ Across lifespan, from birth to death

¹³ Kòmólafé, 18 (italics added).

¹⁴ Kòmólafé, 19.

¹⁵ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 35.

and even life after death, one is surrounded by and defined by the community in different configurations. It is an all-pervasive and sacred entity that sustains life. Every Yoruba person derives his/her dignity and identity from the community. The community provides the context for the individual to unfold as attested to by the famous African philosophical aphorism: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁶ While the individuals have rights and values, such exist only by the virtue of his/her place and obligation in the community. Thus, a person's well-being consists in keeping in harmony with other people and with the cosmic totality.

The Yoruba community is wholistic and inclusive, consisting of both the living and the dead. It reaches to the past through the ancestors, embraces the present in the living members, and opens to the future in the potential precarnate members. The community also includes invisible forces and cosmic totality. Yoruba community transcends familial and geographical boundaries so much so that when a person is in different geographical location s/he is still considered a member of the community.

Community serves as the guardian of morality and social behavior in Yorubaland. It defines social roles, institutes social behavior, enforces social norms, preserves life and traditional institutions, and socializes the children into communal ways of being. It also regulates the socioeconomic processes that individual and family undertake in order to survive. In short, community promotes solidarity, mutual respect, hospitality, vicarious suffering, collective consciousness, and people's selfhood.

¹⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

Indigenous Beliefs and Religious Thought

Yoruba primal beliefs and practices have no official written scripture and systematic theology. The beliefs and practices are contained mainly in the people's experience, history, and myths, sacred recitals, and ritual performances. The people's spiritual worldview is thickly populated by spiritual, human, animate, and inanimate elements. Some of them are visible others are invisible. The visible world consists of the creation, including, humanity, plants, animals, and inanimate beings while the invisible world is the sphere of God, the ancestors, and the spirit. Both the visible and the invisible worlds exist in inextricable unity such that the destruction of any part of this unified mode of existence may obliterate the whole structure.¹⁷ The religious worldview consists of five basic elements, namely, belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in the spirit beings, belief in the ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine.

Belief in God

God in Yoruba belief is known as *Olodumare* or *Olurun*. Olodumare is vital and absolutely indispensable to the Yoruba. According to Idowu, the name connotes "One with Whom man may enter into covenant or communion in any place at any time, one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable, unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable."¹⁸ In essence, Olodumare encapsulates the totality of the Yoruba understanding of divine attributes.

The other name, Olurun, signifies the high office of Olodumare. It means Owner or Lord of Heaven, the supreme ruler who is in heaven. Although Olodumare is the traditional

¹⁷ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 212.

¹⁸ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 36. Chapter 4 of this book is very illuminating on the etymology and meaning of *Olodumare*.

and principal Yoruba name for the Supreme Being, *Olorun* has gained currency in popular culture consequent upon the influence of Christianity and Islam on the people's religious thought. As Idowu observes, "it is the name mostly used in evangelistic work and in literature. It occurs also frequently in ejaculatory prayers...or in answer to salutations."¹⁹ It is, however, common to find both names hyphenated as *Olorun-Olodumare* to express the fullness of divine attributes and majesty especially during prayers and other ritual practices.

The Yoruba believe in the immanence of God. They affirm that *Olodumare* is an all-pervasive potency in every elements and every creature. The several Yoruba personal names compounded with God's name further demonstrate how real *Olodumare* is to the people.²⁰ Such "theophorous proper names", to use Idowu's phrase, are derived from personal experience in the people's daily lives. For instance, when prayers are answered after urgent supplications to God as in the case of prolonged childlessness or for any other event, then in gratitude for benefits and blessings received, theophorous names are given to children born within that period. Theophorous names like *Oluwagbamila* (God rescues me), *Olukoya* (The champion of the cause of the suffering), *Oluwagbenga* (God exalts me), *Oluwawemimo* (God cleanses me) expresses the immanence and inextricability of God in the daily lives and experiences of the people.

The Yoruba also emphasize the transcendence of God in their religious thought. For them, God was originally very close to human beings but later withdrew to the high heaven due to human fault. One Yoruba myth has it that the heaven was so near to the earth that one could stretch out one's hand to touch it. But a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled

¹⁹ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 37.

²⁰ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 150.

face of Olodumare who became angry and withdrew further up in the skies.²¹ Even then, Olodumare is not still actively maintains contact with the creation through direct intervention or through the divinities and the ancestors. This understanding corresponds with the Yoruba sociopolitical system where the powerful but hidden monarch maintains contact with his subjects through his title chiefs.

Belief in the Divinities

Next to Olodumare in Yoruba hierarchy of beings is the pantheon of divinities generically known as *Oriṣa* or *Imọlẹ*. The former name is used more frequently in literature and traditional worship than the latter. In Yoruba thought, the divinities are largely uncreated but generated beings in the ontological category of the spirits. It is believed that they are emanation of Olodumare based on the theological ground that it is inconceivable to talk of the creation of divinities.²² The divinities owe their existence and “absolute fealty” to Olodumare and often represent divine attributes and manifestations either as personifications or as spiritual beings. Although the divinities possess different portfolio in the theocratic government, they are disposable and could become extinct.²³

The Yoruba esteems and put their ultimate trust and hope in Olodumare. Practically, however, they consider it more dignifying and respectful in accordance to their sociopolitical and cultural ethos to approach the Deity through the divinities. It is not uncommon, especially in time of dire circumstances like accident and natural disasters, to find urgent supplication or ejaculatory prayers such as *Olọrun gba mi* (God save me!) being made

²¹ Although the primary intent of this myth is to account for the perceived distance between God and humanity in Yoruba belief, it is obviously problematic. As in many patriarchal societies, the myth follows the ancient practice of portraying women in negative light. A similar example is the Hebrew creation account that attributed the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden to Eve figure in Genesis 3.

²² Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 169. See also J. Omosade Awolalu, *The Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman Group, 1979), 20

²³ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 62.

directly to Olodumare. Thus, within the strictly hierarchical society of the Yoruba, Olodumare is the supreme head and final reference of all of life.

Yet, the divinities stand in unique relationship with Olodumare. They are closer to Olodumare than any other beings in Yoruba worldview. Contrary to the inclination of certain Christian traditions to regard divinities as agents of the devil and rivals of God, Yoruba traditional theology claims that they are divine emissaries.²⁴ They constitute a significant part of the Yoruba theocratic government by functioning as divine intermediaries between Olodumare and human beings. They minister to, represent, and discharge the command of Olodumare on earth. They also act as guardian spirits and cohesive factors in society by ensuring compliance to social order and moral laws. In this capacity and as representatives of Olodumare, the divinities reward faithful and obedient people with prosperity and afflict deviants with sickness and misfortunes. But while the divinities occupy a significant place in Yoruba cosmology the people's attitude toward them varies from healthy respect and sneering contempt. It is common for the divinities to be treated with respect if they deliver the goods and with contempt if they fail.

Prominent among Yoruba divinities are *Orisa-nla*, the great or archdivinity, who is classified as the deputy of Olodumare on matters of creativity, *Orunmila*, the divinity of wisdom and knowledge, *Eṣu*, the ubiquitous and mischief-maker or trickster, and *Ẹla*, the god of renewal and regeneration. Others include *Ogun*, the divinity of war and retributive justice, *Sango*, the manifestation of divine wrath and restorative justice and *Sopona*, an awful

²⁴ For examples of how Christian theology imaginatively gives shape to the invisible world, demonizes and characterizes some powers it considers capricious and indifferent rivals of God, see Ruth Marshall, "Power in the Name of Jesus," *Review of African Political Economy* 53 (1991): 21-37; Ayo Oritsejafor, "Dealing with the Demonic," in *Out of Africa: How the Spiritual Explosion Among Nigerians is Impacting the World*, ed. C. Peter Wagner and Joseph Thompson (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2004), 78-99; and Elaine H. Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995).

dread reality, stands for epidemic such as smallpox.²⁵ Each of the divinities has its sacred symbol, rituals, taboos, music, dance, oral literature, and divination. The major ones have shrines built for their worship all over the land. Their priests and priestesses are reputable leaders in society and are generally identified by their distinctive dress and religious insignia.

Belief in the Spirit Beings

The spirit beings also constitute a significant part of the Yoruba religious thought. Unlike the divinities, the spirit beings are generally nondescript and mostly malignant. Idowu claims that these beings are “apparitional entities which form a separate category of beings from those described as divinities.”²⁶ Mbiti describes the space of these spirit entities in African religious structure of beings: “If we pursue the hierarchical consideration, we can say that the spirits are the ‘common’ spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of men. They are the ‘common populace’ of spiritual beings.”²⁷ They are by and large ubiquitous and disembodied elements that assume different forms, shapes, temporarily inhabiting material object and manifesting their presence and actions through natural objects and phenomena.

There are numerous spirit beings in Yoruba beliefs but three of them are worthy of note. The first group is the ghosts. These are the spirits of those who died mysteriously by drowning, hanging, or by strange and incurable diseases. This group also includes the spirit of those who had been wicked while they were alive, and the dead who are not accorded full traditional burial rites. In the case of the latter, it is believed that such improperly buried dead are denied entrance into the blissful abode of the ancestors, and wander about aimlessly, and

²⁵ For classic works on the status and functions of Yoruba divinities, see Idowu, *Olodumare*, 57-107; and Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 20-49.

²⁶ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 173.

²⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 77.

occasionally enter natural objects so as to molest or wreak havoc in people. This probably explains lavish burial ceremonies in Yorubaland.

The second group of the spirit beings consists of born-to-die spirits (*Abiku*). These are the spirits of some strange and mischievous deceased persons who specialize in reentering women's wombs during pregnancy in order to be born again. The *Abiku* spirits delight in inflicting sadistic pain on their victims (essentially their parents) through the recurring process of birth-death-birth. The Yoruba believe that these spirits form a company and agree to leave the group in turn and to die at predetermined dates and time.²⁸ This is why the bodies of such a spirit are sometimes mutilated when they die so as to prevent them from coming back. They are occasionally prevented from dying through sacrificial rituals.

Another distinct group of the spirit beings is the witches and wizards (*Ajẹ* and *Oṣo*). These are the spirits of men and women who specialize in afflicting and killing people psychologically and through spiritual cannibalism.²⁹ They usually attack, extract, and devour the ethereal bodies of their victims, making the victims experience unusual twists in their lives, work, or family. Victims of witches and wizards often suffer psychological and medically incurable sicknesses, which more often than not will lead to their death unless they are fortunate enough to be delivered by some spiritually superior powers. According to Yoruba belief, the witches and wizards propagate their spirits by initiating impressionable and innocent people as well as by bequeathing their powers to some of their children. It is also believed that some witches and wizards are benevolent because they protect and attract spiritual and material prosperity to their relatives. Such spirits are *Ajẹ funfun* (white witches).

²⁸ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 174

²⁹ E. Bolaji Idowu, "The Challenge of Witchcraft," *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no 1 (1970): 9.

Generally, witches are an organized secret cult whose surreptitious activities are manifest only to the initiated.³⁰ They are the most dread of the spirit beings in Yoruba beliefs as their diabolic activities defy all rational explanations.³¹

It should be pointed out here that some of the beliefs about the nature and activities of the spirit beings outlined in this section might appear ludicrous, superstitious, and unbelievable. But the beliefs persist despite of skepticism, unleashing psychological fear and challenging personal and corporate existence of the people. By and large, most of the spirit beings derive sadistic satisfaction from destroying other people.

Belief in the Ancestors

Ancestral belief is a powerful influence in the psychology and religious life of the Yoruba. As Percy Amaury Talbot pointed out “the dead are not dead but living” for the Yoruba.³² Awolalu writes: “The Yoruba, like other Africans, believe in the active existence of their deceased ancestors” whom they sometimes call the “living dead.”³³ The ancestors are reputable men and women who have died but continue to exact considerable influence on their living relatives. They are real spiritual presence and closest to the spirit world.

The ancestors are distinctly different from other spiritual beings. Unlike the Supreme Being, the divinities, and the spirit beings that are essentially of the spirit world, the ancestors are heroes and heroines of their various tribes. The spiritual beings are non-human beings while the ancestors are humans. This explains why the ancestors represent a more enduring reality than the divinities in the Yoruba worldview. Idowu explains it this way:

³⁰ Idowu, “Challenge of Witchcraft,” 9.

³¹ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 177.

³² Percy Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria: A Sketch of Their History, Ethnology, and Language, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (London: Cass, 1926), 298.

³³ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 51.

The ancestors are regarded still as heads and parts of the families or communities to which they belonged while they were living human beings: for what happened in consequence of the phenomenon called death was only that the family life of this earth has been extended into the after-life or super sensible world. The ancestors remain, therefore, spiritual superintendent of family affairs and continue to bear their titles of relationship life 'father' or 'mother.'³⁴

By the virtue of their position as "spiritual superintendent of family affairs" the Yoruba continuously live with their dead. This is not to suggest that the ancestors still possess physical existence but that they continue to exist in the sub-conscious mindset of the people. This continuous familial relationship informs the necessity to remember and venerate the ancestors during *Egungun* (Masquerade) festivals when supplications are made to them for peace and prosperity.³⁵

Although they are invisible and exist in the supersensible world, the Yoruba believe that the ancestors regulate spiritual and social activities to a degree. They protect their living relatives against misfortunes and adjudicate familial disputes. It is believed that the ancestors punish immorality through personal and group failures, sickness, and natural disasters.³⁶ This belief safeguards the interest of the family or clan insofar as it deters people from committing horrendous crimes such as incest, adultery, or murder. It follows, therefore, that for the Yoruba, the ancestors are not nebulous beings or personified mystical presence but overwhelming realities in human affairs.

The Practice of Magic and Medicine

Another important feature of Yoruba primal beliefs is the practice of magic and medicine. This element plays a vital role in the people's religiosity by providing the means

³⁴ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 184.

³⁵ For discussion on the origin, symbolism, and significance of *Oro* and *Egungun* in Yoruba beliefs, see Idowu, *Olodumare*, 191-94.

³⁶ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 188.

through which they are able to obtain favor from the unseen world and spiritual forces. Magic, according to Idowu, is the attempt to influence people and events by supernatural means for utilitarian purposes. It is based on a claim to possession of esoteric and mysterious knowledge.³⁷ There are both positive and negative magic in the traditional Yoruba society. The positive magic assumes the form of sorcery, exercise of mysterious powers for good, use of charms and amulets, and the practices of occultism for therapeutic and protective purposes. The negative magic takes the form of taboo as a cohesive factor for the social life of the community.

Medicine on the other hand is an art of restoration and preservation of health, which involves medicament and prophylactic.³⁸ The Yoruba word for medicine is *Oogun*. The word is also used in connection with magical practices and other harmful objects like charms and amulets. This dual usage sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between the good and the evil conception except within the context of the issue at stake.

As in African belief, medicine is associated with religion in Yoruba primal religion. The people believe that medicine originates from and remains the property of the Supreme Being who voluntarily gives it to human beings through the divinities. From time immemorial the Yoruba depended on herbs, roots, barks, leaves, plants, and animals for medicinal purposes. Traditional healers are reputable in this regard even though their approaches and procedures are crude and sometimes unhygienic. Even with the development of Western medicine, many Yoruba still have confidence in the potency of traditional *Oogun* and use them as supplement when “foreign” medicine is unable to sufficiently address their needs.

³⁷ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 190.

³⁸ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 197.

In general, magic and medicine are not synonymous in Yoruba conception. Magic influences, controls, and coerces the natural forces and invisible powers by “spell and enchantments” while medicine is preventive and curative. It is, however, possible to confuse the two as they are essentially connected to supernatural powers and some form of ritual usually accompanies their application.³⁹ Nevertheless, both of them are indispensable to Yoruba religion. They are used for either harmful or helpful purposes, depending on each situation.

In this section, I have described the fundamentals of Yoruba belief system. The description shows that hierarchically structured forces, whose activities interact with, affect, and control the visible world in many ways, inhabit the people’s religious worldview. This section will, however, be incomplete without two other important issues: worship and sacrifice and the Yoruba concept of the human being. This is essential insofar as cultic rituals and sacred rites (worship and sacrifice) are visible expressions of religious beliefs. Awolalu observes:

The Yoruba world-view is reflected in the sacrificial rites performed by the people. In other words, sacrificial rites constitute the outward and visible signs of the inner beliefs of the people.⁴⁰

The concept of human being underlines the dynamism that characterizes Yoruba religious worldview. It demonstrates that while the spiritual world controls and shapes the physical world, the latter also exerts subtle influence on the former.

Worship and Sacrifice

In *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* and *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, Idowu and Awolalu respectively analyzed the various cultic practices in Yoruba religion. Their

³⁹ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 198-202.

⁴⁰ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, xv.

analysis indicates that both worship and sacrificial rituals are essential to Yoruba religion. As in other world religions, these cultic practices represent veritable means of communion and communication with the invisible world. Worship and sacrifice are human attempts to acknowledge, venerate, and seek divine favor on both personal and communal lives.⁴¹

According to Idowu, worship constitutes the essential core of Yoruba life. As a “deeply religious” people, worship directs the entire life and daily activities of the Yoruba.⁴² Yoruba worship is ritualistic as it follows set patterns and guided by rules and taboos that to ensure its efficacy and acceptability. Any deviation, violation, or defiance of the ritual rules will not only lead to utter rejection of the rituals but also, and more importantly, incur the wrath of the deity.⁴³ Essentially, Yoruba traditional worshippers are expected to be ceremonially clean, avoid sexual intercourse prior to worship, refrain from the use of bad medicine (*juju*) during worship, and observe the food taboo associated with their divinities.

Idowu identifies four types of worship in Yoruba religion. The first and simplest type is the daily worship. This is the worship that people perform early in the morning before embarking on their daily chores. It is more or less a way of expressing gratitude to the deity for blessings received, and for seeking protection and guidance for the day. It is very private, involving a person or a family.

The second type is the occasional worship. This is performed on the sacred day of a particular Orisha. The occasional worship is more elaborate than daily worship. It involves the devotees of the particular Orisha that is being worshipped. But like the daily worship,

⁴¹ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 107.

⁴² Idowu, *Olodumare*, 107-08.

⁴³ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 108.

occasional worship also aims at acknowledging the good deeds of the Orisha in the community and asking for further help and blessing.

The third type, which is the annual worship, is much enlarged and ceremonious than the second. It involves not only the devotees of the Orisha, but also the town monarch, the whole community, as well as interested strangers in the town. Idowu explains the features and purposes of the annual worship:

This is the occasion for rejoicing and thanksgiving; people come out in their best and give of their best. The offerings are mostly thankofferings, and the meals constitute an opportunity of communion between the divinity and his "children" on the one hand, and then among the "children themselves on the other. It is a time for special renewal and covenants.⁴⁴

The annual worship is a religious and social carnival for the entire community.

The final type is special worship. Idowu observes that the Yoruba often observe special worship based on the needs of individual or the community. For instance, special worship is observed to seek the intervention of the deity at some dire times as war, epidemic, natural disaster, and personal predicament. It is also a moment of petition for divine blessing at the beginning of planting and harvesting seasons as well as any other economic venture. This worship underscores the point that the Yoruba undertakes nothing of importance without first consulting the deity.⁴⁵

The Yoruba are also known for variety of sacrifices (*Ebo or Etutu*). These are indispensable religious features, which according to Idowu and Awolalu restore or lubricate the relationship between the human and divine.⁴⁶ Until nineteenth century the highest form of sacrifice in Yorubaland was human sacrifice. Among other reasons, Peter McKenzie states

⁴⁴ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 109-10.

⁴⁵ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 112.

⁴⁶ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 118; and Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 134-35.

that many Yoruba regarded human sacrifice as “an act of judicial execution of a condemned person, an offering to a god of war for the success of a campaign, and the translation of prisoners of war to the spirit world.”⁴⁷ While there should be no justification whatsoever for this type of sacrifice in modern times, Idowu argues, human sacrifice constitutes the rudimentary stage of religion. It is a recurring phenomenon in the history of other world religions such as Judaism and considered a supreme offering that human beings could offer to the Deity.⁴⁸

Apart from human sacrifice, which has since been abolished in Yorubaland, the Yoruba also observe six other types of sacrifices.⁴⁹ The first type is thanksgiving or communion sacrifice, (*Ẹbọ Ope*). It is a regular sacrifice offered in appreciation of favor received from the Orisa. The second type is votive sacrifice (*Ẹbọ Eje*). As the name implies, this sacrifice is offered to “the Orisa as suppliant to beg for certain favor” in return for which a vow of thanksgiving is made. The third type is propitiation sacrifice (*Ẹbọ Etutu*). This is a sacrifice of appeasement in which the Orisa is urged to intervene in whatever affliction is ravaging the community. Substitutionary sacrifice (*Ẹbọ Ayepin*), which constitutes the fourth type, is offered as a substitute for a person marked for destruction by some spirit beings. It is also used to bargain for the life of an *Abiku* child. In this case, the animal or any other article prescribed by the oracle is usually presented in replacement for the vow the *Abiku* makes to his/her company prior to coming to the world. The fifth sacrifice

⁴⁷ Peter McKenzie, *Hail Orisha! A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Brill, 1997), 258.

⁴⁸ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 120. Idowu cited some instances of human sacrifice in the Abrahamic, Jephthah, and Micah traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures to buttress his claim that human sacrifice is not uncommon in the history of other religions. He argues that such sacrifice constitutes not only the basic stage of religious development but also the immature level of human perception of the will of the deity.

⁴⁹ Awolalu broadly classified Yoruba sacrificial rites into two categories: votive and propitiation. Nevertheless, he agreed with this six sub-divisions “for purposes of elucidation” and discussed each in greater detail. See Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 143-61.

is preventive or apotropaic (*Ẹbọ Ojukoribi*). This is often used to ward off potential danger in society. Finally, there are foundation sacrifices (*Ẹbọ Ipilẹ*). Idowu explains the nature and intent of this category of sacrifice:

This category combines the nature of propitiation and preventive. It is to appease the spirit of the earth in order that all may be well with that which is being founded. The sacrifice is offered at the foundation of a house, village, or town.⁵⁰

The underlying ethos of most of these cultic practices and sacred rituals have been appropriated and spiritualized especially in many Nigerian Churches. This indicates that Yoruba religious beliefs and religious thought are not only very much alive they also represent a credible source for Christian theology, preaching, and liturgy.

The Concept of the Human Person

The Yoruba understand the human person as a unified whole, a living reality whose essence consists of physical and spiritual elements. The physical element is the body, *ara*, which Awolalu describes as “a habitation for the inner man as well as the vehicle of its self-expression.”⁵¹ *Ara* is formed from material substance and possesses transient existence. One creation myth indicates that *Oriṣa-nla*, the archdivinity, fashioned the *ara* from clay while Olodumare supplied the essence of life (*ẹmi*).

In Yoruba thought, the spiritual part of the human person consists of different immaterial elements such as the spirit (*ẹmi*) and soul (*ori*). *Ẹmi*, the essence of life, animates and succeeds the body in the timeless realm of Olodumare. Put simply, *ẹmi* derives from

⁵⁰ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 125. For additional works on the Yoruba religious sacrifice, see McKenzie, *Hail Orisha*, 247-76; and Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 143-61. I acknowledge my indebtedness to Awolalu whose work, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacred Rites*, provided me insight into Yoruba sacrificial terminologies that I used in this section.

⁵¹ J. Omosade Awolalu, “The African Traditional View of Man,” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 2 (1973): 104.

Olodumare and bears the divine element in the human person. It is immortal and indestructible.

The soul or *ori* (literally “head”) is the visible and tangible part of a person. But in Yoruba thought, the visible *ori* is also the symbol of the invisible or internal *ori*, which is known as *ori-inu*. *Ori-inu* (simply *ori*) is the essence or personality of a person. In addition to being the personality, *ori* (soul) is also the bearer of human destiny in Yoruba thought. This is called *kadara* or *Iponri* (literally *ipin-ori* – the share or lot of *ori*). It is that vital feature that rules, controls, and guides one’s activities in life, leading one to success or adversity in life.⁵² This informs the Yoruba pithy saying, *ori la ba bọ, ka fo’riṣa siṣe* (it is *ori* we ought to worship not *oriṣa*). Human destiny, predetermined at the court of Olodumare, is irreversible and determines one’s lot in life.

This belief is also modified in a way that suggests that destiny is susceptible to alteration by certain forces and conditions. For instance, Idowu indicates that *Ifa* divinity has powers to rectify unpleasant destiny through sacrifice. One's character or forces of evil known as *Aye* (the world) may also change destiny. In essence, while destiny is generally regarded as unalterable, experience shows that in practice people accept that moral disposition or negative forces could radically affect one’s lot in life.⁵³ But in a situation where one’s destiny is prematurely terminated by unforeseen circumstances like death in battle or accident, the Yoruba believe that the victim has another chance of completing his/her destiny through reincarnation. Either way, therefore, human destiny is irrevocable and unalterable in Yoruba belief.

⁵² Idowu, *Olodumare*, 170.

⁵³ Idowu, *Olodumare*, 176-82.

The idea of reincarnation also points to Yoruba firm belief in life after death. While recognizing the reality of death, the Yoruba claim that death is not the final destiny of human beings but an inevitable rite of passage into the life hereafter. In other words, while the physical body dies and is “buried in the earth, the essential person passes on into another life, it is held responsible for its deeds or misdeeds, and it is rewarded or punished accordingly by the Author of life.”⁵⁴

Above all, the Yoruba believe that the human person is a relational being. As indicated earlier in this chapter, human beings are not created to be in solitude but to be in relation with one another and the whole cosmos.⁵⁵ It is in relationship that people find the full essence of their beings. This explains why the whole existence from birth to death in Yorubaland, as in other African communities, is organically enmeshed in a series of association. One is born into a family, trained by the entire community, and initiated into series of societies, associations or age groups through several rites of passage. Thus, communality is the bedrock of Yoruba concept of the human person for in their social framework, *homo sapien* is eminently *homo socius*.

In conclusion, I have briefly given a descriptive account of the origin, cultural ethos, and religious worldview of the Yoruba of Nigeria in this chapter. What stands out in this account is that the Yoruba are a people of intricate religious thought and complex sociopolitical structures. Although the surge of foreign ideology and philosophy are causing fast disappearance of the visible aspects of the traditions practices and culture, their values and thought forms are resilient in the minds of the people. They continue to shape social activities and provide anchorage especially at the time of crisis. How then has Christian

⁵⁴ Awolalu, “African Traditional View of Man,” 116.

⁵⁵ Awolalu, “African Traditional View of Man,” 112-13.

preaching been cognizance of these enduring traditional beliefs that give cohesion and meaning to Yoruba people? This question demands a historical study of preaching ministry in Yorubaland, which is taken up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

AN OVERVIEW OF PREACHING IN YORUBALAND

Following the descriptive analysis of the Yoruba traditional context in the previous chapter, I now turn to the history of preaching in Yorubaland. The intent here is to discuss the diverse preaching practices among the Yoruba, show the degree to which each of them relates to the people's context, and draw attention to the strengths and inadequacies of each practice. To do this, I discuss the preaching practices of the pre-Christian era, European missionary period, mainline churches, Pentecostal movement, and Indigenous churches in Yorubaland. It should be noted that the preaching strands of these periods and movements are not discrete but overlap in many ways.

Preaching in the Pre-Christian Era

Africans in general and Yoruba in particular have always engaged in religious proclamation prior to their encounter with Christianity. One popular Yoruba adage says,

*Aye l'a ba 'fa, aye l'a ba 'male
osan gangan ni 'gbabgo wole de.*

We met *Ifa* in the world, we met Islam in the world,
but it was high noon before Christianity arrived.¹

This adage points to the late arrival and novelty of Christianity to the Yoruba religious repertory. Before the introduction of Christianity to Yorubaland in 1840s, Yoruba people worshipped God and communicated religious messages in ways that made the most sense and conveyed life and truth in their sociocultural milieu. The Yoruba, like other Africans, are

¹ See Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 187; and Abimbola, 52. *Ifa* is a geomantic form of divination connected to the Yoruba cult of Orunmila. In Yoruba belief, Orunmila, one of the deputies of *Olodumare*, is credited with unparalleled knowledge and wisdom. This acclaimed reputation for accurate prediction and prophecy makes it somewhat appealing for many Yoruba to always consult *Ifa* before embarking on any major project. For detailed discussion on the origin and significance of *Ifa* in Yoruba primal religion, see Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*.

homo religiosus radicaliter – radically religious human beings. Indeed, religion is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in Yorubaland as it is integral to the people's life and social institutions. It creates and maintains a harmonious relationship between humanity and the cosmic world on the one hand and among human beings on the other.²

Pre-Christian preaching was integral to the process of socialization in Yorubaland. It served as conduit for character formation and induction of young generation into the accumulated wisdom, lore, and values of society with a view to molding them into responsible adults. It also addressed the spiritual needs of the community as a whole. Every member of the community was socialized into religious activities through participation in rituals and ceremonies.

Traditional religious functionaries such as diviners (*Babalawo*), medicine men/women, priests/priestesses, traditional rulers, and family heads played significant roles in these activities. They mediated between the worshippers and object of worship, presided over religious ceremonies, performed religious rites, and communicated divine messages to the people.³ They communicated their messages during religious festivals, family settings, social engagements, and occasions of misfortunes such as death or natural disasters.

Unlike the propositional style and philosophical discourses that characterize Western Christian preaching the Yoruba convey their homily orally and conversationally. They employ African oral literature such as songs, sayings, proverbs, verses, idioms, sacred tales, riddles, legends, plays, folklores, prayers, personal testimonies, and stories.⁴ The focus is generally placed on family and community values, religious beliefs, moral ethics, and

² Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 5, 108.

³ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 130.

⁴ For further study on African oral literature, see Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 34-43.

acceptable social behavior. They shared experiences on how to overcome misfortunes, protection against forces of evil and enemies, maintenance of cosmic balance, and the necessity of being in good relationship with *Olodumare* and other lesser divinities. They also addressed issues relating to the community and the ancestors.

The foregoing underlies the significance and distinctive characteristics of religious communication in Yorubaland prior to the advent of Christianity. It shows that what European missionaries introduced to Yorubaland was a new form of religious communication that was characteristic of their European faith tradition. Moreover, the that the basic features of this pre-Christian preaching are, no doubt, capable of enriching the quality of preaching in Yorubaland if they are adequately engaged.

European Missionary Preaching

Christian preaching began in Yorubaland with the arrival of the European missionaries in mid-nineteenth century C.E. on the invitation of an ex-slave convert from Abeokuta. The invitation states in part: "For Christ's sake, come quick. Let nothing but sickness prevent you...Do, do, for God's sake start at this moment; do not neglect me and all this burden; it is more than I can bear!"⁵ This call elicited immediate responses from several overseas missions including, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, the Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee, the Southern Baptist Missionary from the United States of America, and the United Presbyterian Mission. The Roman Catholic and other foreign missionary bodies arrived much later.

In order to understand the preaching traditions of the European Missionaries, it is important to examine the motivating factors and theological content underpinning their

⁵ F. Deaville Walker, *A Hundred Years in Nigeria* (London: Cargate Press, 1942), 14, cited in C.G. Beata, ed., *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 421.

missions in Yorubaland. This is so because the objectives and theological content of the missionary preaching is rooted in their marching order “to send the glorious Gospel of the Blessed God to the Heathen.”⁶ This responsibility apparently informed their mission and preaching paradigm.

For the most part, some of the missionaries considered Yorubaland a dark nation inhabited by “untutored,” “ignoble savages,” and the residue of the unregenerate human race. What the Nigerian religious scholar, J. O. Akao, says about Africa explains the objective of missionary effort among the Yoruba.

Fired by an evangelistic frenzy similar to that which sent the early Apostles away from Jerusalem to the gentile world, Western Christians rushed to the continent of Africa where lived, from their point of view the remainder of the human race yet to be saved. Their preconceptions about Africa, its geography and the political and social conditions of the inhabitants, led them to taking decisions on their evangelistic methods and strategy, even before studying the people to know how to address themselves to their situation. Though the gospel was preached, but because it came in packet with politics, commerce and culture, some political and social analysts have come to look at the missionaries’ activities as more of a curse rather than a blessing for the black man.⁷

Emmanuel A. Ayandele is one such sociopolitical analyst. In *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*, Ayandele argues that missionary enterprise radically overturned Nigeria traditional society and culture.

Missionary activity was a disruptive force, rocking traditional society to its very foundations, denouncing ordered polygamy in favor of disordered monogamy, producing disrespectful, presumptuous, and detribalised children through the mission schools, destroying the high moral principles and orderliness of indigenous society through denunciation of traditional religion without an adequate substitute, and transforming the mental outlook of Nigerians in a way that made them imitate

⁶ See D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 65.

⁷ J. O. Akao, “Is the Mission of the Church Still Understood in Western Terms?” in *The State of Christian Theology in Nigeria, 1980-81*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1986), 53.

European values slavishly whilst holding in irrational contempt valuable features of traditional culture.⁸

While I share the patriotic sentiment of Ayandele it must also be noted that the missionaries had noble and commendable motives. One must not fail to acknowledge the noble effort of the missionaries who worked assiduously to eradicate slavery and human sacrifice. Some of them translated part of the Bible and church hymnal into Yoruba vernacular, while some others encouraged education, health services, and other humanitarian services that are of incalculable benefits to the people.⁹ To the contrary, some critics argue that the programs were instruments of conversion and aberrant to the natural development of the natives.¹⁰ However, it cannot be denied that these services were primarily designed to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the people.¹¹

Having said that, however, one must underline that one major problem of missionary activity consists in the mission paradigm and preaching styles. Archival material indicates that in an attempt to convert the people, the missionaries denigrated the Yoruba sociocultural milieu.¹² In terms of mission paradigm, they were “guided less by a theory of evangelism than by exemplary narratives or instances of it, drawn from the Bible itself or from published

⁸ Emmanuel A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1966), 329.

⁹ Although this pioneer Bible translation, undertaken by Samuel Ajayi Crowther, has been heavily criticized as a result of its linguistic problem, the project is actually commendable as it made the Bible and Christianity more accessible to the people. For more information see Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*; and Komolafe, “Transformation of African Ecclesiology.”

¹⁰ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 39.

¹¹ See Desmond Tutu, “Towards a Relevant Theology,” in *Confronting Life: Theology Out of Context*, ed. M. P. Joseph (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 150-51. Komolafe made similar case when he argues that despite the paternalistic and ethnocentricity of the missionaries, they deserve some tribute for their commitment, dedication, and sacrifice for the cause of the gospel in Africa. He cautioned critics of mission activity to always be mindful of “simple human infallibility” that often assail the best human intention. See Komolafe, 90-95; and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 39.

¹² Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 152-86.

biographies of missionaries.”¹³ The Bible was, for them, a kind of recipe book with preaching prescriptions to follow. Characterized by literal interpretation of the Bible, the early missionaries gave little or no attention to the context of the audience in their preaching. Peel reported one such approach from the June 13, 1853 journal entry of J. T. Kefer, a CMS missionary at Ibadan.

Read and studied the Bibel (sic) the whole forenoon, especially the Acts in order to learn from the Apostles how the Gospel must be preached to the heathen. St. Paul’s first and second missionary journeys, Acts 13-18, gave me much light. I never read the Acts so attentively.¹⁴

This archival material demonstrates that the missionary employed biblical mission and preaching patterns as prototypes without critical analysis of their mission context. They propagated a theology from above, focused on soul snatching, judgment against idolatry, eschatological pronouncements, and otherworldly spirituality. An account, credited to Ogedengbe, one of the earliest converts at Ibadan, reveals the theological content of the missionary preaching in Yorubaland. In the account, Ogedengbe narrated his encounter with the missionary to his town men and women.

He [*the missionary*] told us of heaven where the angels paraded with their gracious and merciful wings ready to accept any man who served the Lord. But he told us also of hell with the fires burning for ever where witches, wizards and evil people would go...he told us also of the benefits that would accrue to us in form of salaries. We wondered what salary was. It was later on that we started to understand everything.¹⁵

It is rather difficult to confirm how much of this foreign and unrelated theology Ogedengbe and other converts actually understood and appropriated.

What is certain, however, is that this esoteric and uncritical preaching method generated cross-cultural misunderstanding and occasional hostility between the missionaries

¹³ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 154.

¹⁴ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 155.

¹⁵ Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 178 (italics added).

and the Yoruba.¹⁶ Moreover, the preaching was unable to address the deepest concerns of the people. Akao cited T.S. Johnson, one of the earliest Yoruba pastors, to justify this point:

There are certain beliefs inherent in our people to which they hold fast and by which their lives are governed, but which are repressed and hidden because the religion of the West, which they adopted, does not countenance them, for instance, belief in the existence of evil spirits.¹⁷

While a handful of Yoruba people accepted the new faith partly due to its accruable social benefits, many of them rejected it. The latter saw it an affront and a threat to their traditional lifestyle.¹⁸ Even those who embraced it, as Johnson commented, sublimated their traditional belief systems for fear of being upbraided by their European pastors. The crux of the matter, which Geoffrey Parrinder lucidly articulates, is that “even when objects of worship are changed, images broken, charms (sometimes) thrown away, it is difficult to adopt a completely different worldview.”¹⁹ The primal worldview is resilient and deeply rooted in the people and continuously shapes their inner psyche. One wonders, therefore, why the missionaries failed to appropriate such an enduring ethos in their preaching.

There are several reasons for this but three of them call for careful consideration. First, many Europeans held and operated under gross misconception of Africa. They classified Africa a “Dark Continent,” inhabited by barbarous and carnivorous beings. They saw Africans as uncivilized and underdeveloped heathens devoid of credible culture and religious beliefs. Perhaps, this is why Diedrich Westermann saw slavery a providential means of saving African souls.²⁰

¹⁶ For the variety of Yoruba responses to Christianity see J. B. Schuyler, “Conceptions of Christianity in the Context of Tropical Africa: Nigerian Reactions to its Advent,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. C.G. Baeta (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 200-23.

¹⁷ Akao, 58.

¹⁸ Oduyoye, 34-37.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1969), 229.

²⁰ Diedrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 142.

In *African Ideas of God* Edward Smith narrated an example of this grotesque misconception. He recounted a revealing encounter he had with Emil Ludwig, a nineteenth century European biographer, who found it unfathomable for Africans to conceive God. According to the account, Ludwig skeptically inquired about the business of the missionaries in Africa. When he received the report about Africans' reception of the knowledge of God's saving grace, Ludwig expressed his perplexity with a philosophical question: "How can the untutored Africans conceive God? How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing."²¹ It cannot be ruled out that some missionaries entered their mission fields with this kind of ethnocentrism. For instance, Peel says this about the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Yorubaland:

This mismatch between Yoruba expectations and CMS intentions does much to explain the variety of reported Yoruba responses to the missionary preaching. Coming from outside with the self-image that they were freely offering something of transcending value which the Yoruba could not see that they needed, the missionaries felt justified in intruding on the situations and asserting their views in ways that often provoked highly negative reactions.²²

This prejudicial preaching approach tended to regard the minds of Yoruba audiences as *tabular rasa*, blank slates, on which the missionaries had divine injunction to inscribe their Eurocentric Christianity and moral values. But Yolanda Smith, a North American educator, rightly regards this condescending approach nothing short of a clear display of prejudice and lack of sophistication on the part of the missionaries.²³

The second reason for the missionaries' preaching approach was their deep commitment to the mission mandate and theological persuasions of their home missions.

²¹ Edwin W. Smith, ed., *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 1.

²² Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 158.

²³ Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spiritual: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 23.

Since they were products of their age and home contexts, the missionaries were contemptuous of the Yoruba cultural expression. Sunday Komolafe expressed it more succinctly: "Driven by their evangelical assumption that divine truths could not be perceived in other religions other than the Christian faith, the missionaries were not willing to make any concessions to the indigenous religions."²⁴ They utilized the theological concepts and religious thought of their home context so as to uphold and carefully entrench the western Christian traditions.²⁵

The situation was not any different in Yorubaland. Being offshoots of the pietistic tradition, the theological persuasions of most of the missionaries in Yorubaland reflected its puritan heritage. It consisted of public piety, holiness, moral living, overcoming human sinful nature, *sola fidei* (faith alone) in the salvific work of Christ, absolute conversion of the heart, and infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. For them, such themes are non-negotiable for they are the supracultural theological underpinnings of Christianity.

The third reason concerns the role of the missionary enterprise in the colonization of Africa. There is little doubt that the missionary preaching paradigm constituted part of the Western hegemonic agenda.²⁶ The gospel came to Africa on the tidal wave of western cultural expansion. J. F. Ade Ajayi, a notable Yoruba historian, contends, and the missionaries were not merely bearers of Protestant evangelism but important facilitators of

²⁴ Komolafe, 59.

²⁵ Oduyoye, 38.

²⁶ K. Asare Opoku examined the complicity of the missionary movement during the colonial era and concluded that owing to the intertwining nature of religion and culture on the one hand and the missionaries' attack on African way of life on the other, the missionaries were catalysts to European imperialism and the spread of Western culture to Africa. See K. Asare Opoku, "Religion in Africa during the Colonial Era," in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 508-38.

the ideological thrust of Western hegemony and civilization.²⁷ Max Warren conceded this assertion in the preface to *Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*.

But it has to be admitted quite frankly that...the missionaries of the Christian Church have commonly assumed that Western civilization and Christianity were two aspects of the same gift which they were commissioned to offer to the rest of mankind.²⁸

The missionaries prosecuted this “two aspects of the same gift” when they spoke of the gospel as the “light of the nation,” employed assertive language of universalism and generic human experiences, and dismissed the specific sociocultural experiences and religious worldview of Yoruba people.

The point at issue here is that ideological imposition is an oppressive tool that holds the mind captive. It is an arsenal the powerful usually employed to subdue the underprivileged classes, and thereby robbing them of their voices, cultural identities, and traditional values. Virgil P. Elizondo was aware of this when he writes:

Conquest comes through military force and is motivated by economic reasons. Yet, once it has taken place, conquest is totalitarian. It imposes not only institutions of the powerful, but also a new worldview in conflict with the existing one. This imposition disrupts the worldview of the conquered in such a way that nothing makes sense anymore. In many ways, the ideas, the logic, the wisdom, the art, the custom, the language, and even the religion of the powerful are forced into the life of the conquered. Although the conquered try to resist, the ways and worldview of the powerful begin to penetrate their minds, so that, even if political and economic independence come about, the native culture can never simply return to its pre-conquest ways. Yet there is not only the obvious violence of the physical conquest, but also the deeper violence of the disruption and attempts to destroy the conquered inner worldview, which gives cohesion and meaning to existence. The conquered fundamental core religious symbols proved the ultimate roots of the group's identity, because they mediate the absolute. They are the final tangible expressions of the absolute. There is nothing beyond them that can put us into contact

²⁷ J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 14. See also Saburi O. Biobaku, *The Egba and Their Neighbours, 1842-1872* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 35.

²⁸ See Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 5. See also Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 79.

with God. They are the ultimate justification of the worldview of the group and the force that cements all the elements of the life of the group into a cohesive, meaningful, and tangible world order. When such symbols are discredited or destroyed, nothing makes sense anymore. The worldview moves from order to chaos, from significant mystery to meaningless confusion.²⁹

Nothing could better explain the situation among the Yoruba. Although there are few positive exceptions to missionary attitude toward the lifestyle of the natives, missionary preaching was to a large degree an extension of colonialism in Nigeria.³⁰ As Idowu argues, the missionary brand of Christianity is a “white man’s cult, a kind of imperialistic witchcraft which has been employed to fetter the souls of Nigerians for the sinister purpose of colonial exploitation.”³¹ While the colonial administrators deployed military and legislative powers to subdue the people, many of the missionaries utilized ideological schema to fetter their mind and upset their socioreligious system.³²

The influence and power of the European missionary ideological imposition were so intrusive, pervasive, and enveloping as to render the culture and experience of Yoruba people invisible and inconsequential. It is, therefore, not surprising that the ideological conquest has produced deluded hybrids-individuals who disowned native culture and embrace alien cultural values.³³

²⁹ Virgil P. Elizondo, “Metizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allan Figueroa Deck (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 107.

³⁰ Oduyoye, 33. The Rev David and Ann Hinderer stand out among the few missionaries who appreciated and associated with the natives so much so that they even subverted some condescending and prejudicial colonial policies. For more information about their exemplary lifestyle, see W.O Ajayi, “Christians Involvement in Ijaye War,” in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, ed. O.U. Kalu (London: Longman, 1980), 200-31.

³¹ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 2.

³² Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 261-62; and Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 4-5.

³³ Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 261. For more information on the impact of the European missionary ideology on the sociocultural life and mentality of the Nigerians, see J. Akinyele Omoyajowo, *Religion, Society and the Home* (Nigeria: Vicco International and Printing, 1983), 63-73.

Mainline Church Preaching

The mainline churches came into being in the nineteenth-century as a result of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria. These churches include the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, and the Baptist. Also included in this category are the first generation of African Churches such as the African Church Bethel, the United African Methodist Church (*Eleja*) and the Native Baptist Church. The latter are so classified because they are offshoots of the mainline churches.³⁴

The mainline churches have manifested at least four different preaching styles since their inception. The first expression dates back to the late period of the missionary era in mid-nineteenth century CE. This was the time Yoruba preachers were emerging from missionary tutelage and were being assigned to mission stations to replace some of the departed European missionaries, or cover areas that lacked foreign preachers. In other words, as Christian mission expanded in Yorubaland, it became necessary to assign native preachers to complement missionary efforts due to the shortage of the latter. Most of those assigned were interpreters and graduate apprentices to the missionaries who expectedly mimicked the preaching pattern of their missionary progenitors.

The first expression of the mainline church preaching is in this regard an offshoot of the missionary experience. The pattern follows the “puritan plain style” and preserves essentially the same forms and content of missionary preaching. It is simple, straight to the point, and treats Biblical texts directly without paying attention to the contexts of both the text and the audience. According to Ronald J. Allen, the purpose of the puritan plain style is

³⁴ While diverging on cultural and political grounds, most of the first generation African churches maintain the essential features of their respective progenitor mainline churches. See Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 180.

to help the audience “encounter the gospel as directly as possible.”³⁵ The theological content centers on scriptural holiness, public piety, and eschatological issues. An encounter between a Yoruba woman and W.S. Allen, one of the earliest African preachers in the 1860s, vividly illustrates this preaching pattern.

He [Allen] preached to a hundred people at Eleta. A woman in the crowd interrupts with praise to her deity Ori (personal destiny). Allen refutes her by saying that her Ori is merely made of cowries, and only God who made them should be worshipped.³⁶

Although this journal entry did not contain the content of Allen’s sermon, it does show his outright rejection of the woman’s worldview. By praising her ori, the woman expressed an essential Yoruba belief in the essence of human personality. But Allen failed to recognize the ground of the woman’s religious belief system and by so doing demonstrated his captivity to the European worldview and his relative lack of cross-cultural preaching experience. His preaching, in this regard, lacked theological reflection that was necessary for a culturally relevant sermon.

The second expression of preaching in the mainline churches emanates from the first generation African churches. These are churches that on political and cultural grounds seceded from mission established churches between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the very period of massive struggle for the political independence of Nigeria from colonial rule.³⁷

³⁵ Ronald J. Allen, ed. *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1998), 7.

³⁶ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 157.

³⁷ Deji Ayegboyin, a Nigerian Church historian, argues that the pioneers of the first generation African churches protested against discrimination by the white missionaries and the undermining of African customs such as polygamy and sought to worship God in an atmosphere free of foreign leadership and theological control. See Deji Ayegboyin and S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Nigeria: Greater Heights Publications, 1997), 38-39.

The preaching ethos of the African churches reflected the political mood of the era. It focused on political, religious, and cultural liberation themes with a view to conscientizing and motivating the Yoruba to cast off the chains which colonialism had forged upon their hearts and souls, revive traditional spirituality and cultural lifestyle, and actualize the totality of their identity and humanity. This preaching showed the first attempt of contextualization inasmuch as it significantly forged the spirit of the political slogan: "Africa for Africans." This politically charged preaching sets the stage for Indigenous churches, which eventually rejected imported elements of Christianity in favor of African heritage.³⁸

Scholasticism, which gained prominence soon after political independence in 1960s, is the third expression of preaching in the mainline churches. This was a style founded on human intelligence and associated with the intellectuals who sought for theological solution to life problems through human philosophy. As Kurewa points out, scholasticism was the rational "way the church explained problems of life and their context, such as the existence of God."³⁹ The theological content of this preaching stream was rooted in Western philosophy and characterized by Hellenistic rhetoric, rational argument, and historical-critical methodology of biblical interpretation. It was prepositional as it enumerated the points that relate to the major claim of the sermon.⁴⁰ It also emphasized intellectual rigor and rational presentation of the gospel.

This abstract intellectual preaching reflected the impact of western theological education on African preachers. In fact, many of the earliest Yoruba preachers were products

³⁸ J. D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1968), 55-57.

³⁹ Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity*, 58.

⁴⁰ See J. Carleton Hayden, "Black Episcopal Preaching in the Nineteenth Century: Intellect and Will," *Journal of Religious Thought* 39 (1982): 12-20.

of Western universities and/or seminaries both at home and abroad. They were committed church folks, carefully trained and indoctrinated in the theological traditions of Western Christianity. Regardless of their rhetorical prowess, the foreign theologies stifled their native spirituality and capacity for affective religious communication.⁴¹ Although some of the preachers of this age may be unintentionally disdainful of African contexts, they considered local traditions relatively underdeveloped and inadequate to express the gospel.⁴² On the whole, some of them, like the missionary interpreters of the earlier generation, were unable to extricate themselves from the captivity of foreign spirituality and intellectual schema.⁴³

One major deficiency of this preaching approach was its inability to connect Biblical text to Yoruba contexts. The proclamation was an external ideal, which significantly transforms Yoruba experience of God from a living reality into philosophical abstractions. The approach confined preaching within the protective wall of the conscious and the rational while leaving the great deep of the subliminal untouched. Consequently, the preaching fostered spiritual elitism that attracted scholars and repelled common folks.⁴⁴ But since the primary concern of religion for the Yoruba is spiritual fulfillment and existential wholeness, an exclusively and overly intellectual approach cannot be effective cornerstone of Christian preaching in Yorubaland.⁴⁵ Perhaps this is why the appeal and prominence of the preaching style have diminished even though its residue could still be found in some seminaries and among the academia.

⁴¹ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 19-20.

⁴² Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 20.

⁴³ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* 14.

⁴⁴ J. Akinyele Omoyajowo, "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria since Independence," in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luke, et al. (London: R. Collings, 1978), 97.

⁴⁵ Peel pointed to the fact that religion among the Yoruba is essentially human centered and existentially focused. See Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 255.

The fourth strand of preaching in the mainline churches is the evangelical style. This style will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. In the meantime, it is enough to point out that evangelical preaching style is the most recent of the four trends and was precipitated by two main factors. The first factor was the unpleasant outcome of scholastic preaching in the life of the people. As earlier indicated, scholastic preaching was directed at the mind, left the heart undernourished, and consequently bred spiritual apathy. The Evangelical preaching style arose in this context as a revival movement for spiritual reawakening. The second factor was the challenge from both the Indigenous and Pentecostal churches. The sermonic fervor of this movement, which will be discussed shortly, compelled the mainline churches to seek other ways of making the Gospel more intelligible and relevant to the needs of their members.

Indigenous Church Preaching

Nigeria witnessed the rise of Indigenous churches in the second decade of the twentieth century. This brand of Christian movement is unlike the mainline churches and their offshoots. They are sociologically and theologically native; established, funded, and managed by Nigerians.⁴⁶ These new religious movements varied in style, organization, and attitude and have been named Separatist, Ethiopian, Zionist, Spiritual, Prophetic, and Praying Churches.⁴⁷ Some of these nomenclatures reflect the historical development of the churches while others completely obfuscate their true character.⁴⁸ In this regard, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), in accordance with the position of the World Council of Churches (WCC), classified them as the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC)

⁴⁶ Omoyajowo, "Aladura Churches in Nigeria since Independence," 96.

⁴⁷ Ayegboyin and Ishola, 11-20.

⁴⁸ See S.A. Adewale, *The African Church (Inc.), 1901-1986: A Synthesis of Religion and Culture* (Ibadan: S. A. Adewale, 1988), 45.

to reflect their origin.⁴⁹ The churches are known as *Ijo Aladura* (praying church) in Yorubaland based on their strong belief in the efficacy of prayer.⁵⁰

In order to understand the preaching style of these churches, it is necessary to briefly identify the immediate and remote factors that necessitated their emergence.

Historically, the Indigenous churches emerged on the wake of the 1918 influenza epidemic that ravaged Nigeria and the whole of West Africa.⁵¹ This disaster compelled some Yoruba Christians to set up prayer fellowships to seek divine assistance for the cessation of the calamity and cater to the spiritual needs of the victims and their families.⁵² This step was remotely motivated by a desire to reform existing mainline churches so as to make them more responsive to the urgent needs of the people.⁵³

Prior to the rise of the Indigenous churches there seemed to be spiritual degeneration in many mainline churches. It appears that the worship, preaching, and spirituality of the mainline churches were ineffective partly due to the unsatisfying foreign mode of religious

⁴⁹ The department of Missionary Studies of the World Council of Churches convened a consultation on this subject that was held at the Mindolo Ecumenical Center, Kitwe, and Northern Rhodesia in 6th-13th September 1962. As a result of the consultation, WCC denoted Indigenous churches as African Independent Churches or African Instituted Churches. See H.W. Turner, "Chart of Modern African Religious Groups," in *African Independent Church Movements*, ed. Victor Hayward (London: WCC, 1963), 13. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is an ecumenical organization in Nigeria. Although established as a religious body, the function of the association is more political in that it provides a platform for churches to collectively respond to political issues in Nigeria.

⁵⁰ For major works on Aladura Churches in Nigeria, see Harold W. Turner, *A History of an African Independent Church* vol. 2, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); J. D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba*; J. Akinyele Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of an African Independent Church* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1982); C.O. Oshun, "Christ Apostolic Church of Nigeria: A Suggested Pentecostal Consideration of its Historical, Organizational and Theological Development, 1918 – 1975," (Ph.D. diss., University of Exeter, 1981); Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983); and Afeosemime Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 1999).

⁵¹ It is estimated that the influenza epidemic claimed about 250,000 victims in all of Southern Nigeria alone. For detail, see Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba*, 62.

⁵² Ayegboyin, 23-24.

⁵³ R.C. Mitchell and H. W. Turner, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Modern African Religious Movements* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 170.

and cultural expressions they embodied. Idowu underscores this point when he attributed the ineptitude of the Church in Africa to

the prefabricated liturgies which have been imported from Europe and imposed upon this continent [Africa]... There are certain emotional depths which are not being reached by Africans by these liturgies. Hymns are European verses sung to European tunes, the phraseology of the liturgies are either archaic, barely intelligent, or often irrelevant in Africa.⁵⁴

In response to this state of spiritual dereliction, some Charismatic Church leaders incorporated African religiocultural elements like singing, drumming, and dancing, into their Christian expression.⁵⁵ Even though these could be considered outward adornment and superficiality, they are nonetheless indications of enthusiasm for contextualization.

Closely related to the ineffective foreign liturgy is the otherworldly theology of the mission churches. The otherworldly theology emphasized spiritual salvation to the total exclusion of the physical and material salvation. Both the liturgy and theology of the mission churches were alien and unable to provide adequate answers to the existential problems of Nigerians. The mainline churches emphasized doctrinal issues but scarcely attended to other human concerns. In contrast, the Indigenous churches developed a this-worldly theological orientation that is rooted in real life and emphasized holistic salvation that addressed the spiritual, material, and physical concerns of the people.

There are two distinctive styles of preaching in the Indigenous churches. The first style, which was prevalent at the inception of the movement, is more of pastoral counseling, moral admonition, and spiritual exhortation. This takes the form of encouraging faith in God and belief in the efficacy of prayers. They saw preaching as “inseparable from the reality of

⁵⁴ Idowu, “Predicament of the Church in Africa,” 417 (italics added).

⁵⁵ Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 181.

life” and an ecclesiastical admonition and exhortation for those who suffer.⁵⁶ The logic of this preaching is that the efficacy of religion consists in developing relevant theological concepts that address local context and meet the deepest needs of a given people. It is God’s grace reaching out to meet human needs.⁵⁷

The uniqueness and ingenuity of the indigenous churches is perceivable in the way they read and apply the Scripture to human situations. Komolafe states:

The Aladura read Scripture in a certain way, so persistently, in fact, that this indigenous reading has become the templates through which they view all of Scripture. Unlike the mission churches, the Aladura are not merely given to an intellectual systematization of Scripture. Rather, their reading and interpretation of Scripture are conditioned by presuppositions arising out of their cultural context and how it speaks into their life situation. While we can claim that the Scripture is central to their beliefs and practices, it is nonetheless, a theological reflection largely influenced by their local situation.⁵⁸

The *Aladura* (Indigenous churches) reflected the current trends in the Third World that theology and, of course, preaching are eminently contextual.⁵⁹ The Indigenous churches take the contemporary context as the locus of divine activity and the starting point of preaching engagement. They propagate simple but effective theologies that rotate on faith, the supremacy of God, spiritual satisfaction, and divine power to deal with evil spirits and meet the needs of everyday realities. They also accept the Bible as a divinely inspired book that demonstrates God’s power over demons and oppression and focus more on the healing and miracle narratives. Perhaps, this is why Komolafe submit: “Aladura Christianity brought Christ into the heart of Yoruba culture so that the Christ they preach is the Savior who gives

⁵⁶ J.J. Mbuyazi, “The Preacher’s Sermon and Layman’s Reactions,” *Credo* 14, no. 2 (1967): 26.

⁵⁷ Komolafe, 130.

⁵⁸ Komolafe, 133.

⁵⁹ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *One Gospel – Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003); and Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

hope to the future while meeting present needs.”⁶⁰ Whatever may be its weakness, there is no doubt that this style was a concrete step toward contextual preaching insofar as it critically embodies the reality of the audience.

The second style of preaching in the Indigenous churches is evangelical. As in the first style, the prevailing context of the Church in particular and the country in general informed this preaching approach. The remarkable success of these churches during the 1918 epidemic period strengthened their conviction of divine blessing and gave them impetus for expansion. As the churches emerged from its formative stage during the 1930 revival explosion and began to envision nation wide evangelization, it became imperative for them to reinvent their mission and preaching paradigms.⁶¹ This led to the adoption of the evangelical ethos that focused on human depravity, the necessity of salvation and sanctification, confession, repentance, and renunciation of sin, and acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Savior of humanity.

One criticism often voiced against the Indigenous churches concerns witch-hunting, syncretism, and simplistic reading of the Bible.⁶² The criticism of witch hunting may hold sway over the founding leaders of the churches due to their low level of education. The same is not true of current leaders however. Many of the current leaders are highly educated and have been able to reform some of the past approaches while adhering to the core beliefs of the Church. The latter strongly hold that Christianity must adapt itself to the people’s context or become irrelevant. Hence, Komolafe concludes:

⁶⁰ Komolafe, 118.

⁶¹ For information regarding the 1930 revival movement, see Komolafe, 111-113; and Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, 91-105.

⁶² John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gift, and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches: A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1998), 27-45.

By adapting Christianity to African taste and sensibility, the Aladura churches continue to provide a theological framework that combines fundamental elements of Christianity and African culture in a way that did not devalue the distinctive elements of each. It is through this resilient and dynamic form of Christianity that the church gained its initial momentum and maintained its authenticity among the Nigerian people.⁶³

Besides, the charge of syncretism is still part of the ploy to suggest the existence of a mythic “kernel” of the Gospel. Until recently, it seems to have been the common trend to portray the Gospel in a supracultural perspective and untainted by human reality. This is why one often hears some evangelical missionaries like Kato and Komolafe arguing for the preservation of the “kernel” of the Gospel.⁶⁴ But what is the “kernel” or “core” of the Gospel that is neither tinged by culture and historical reality nor unmediated by human experience? Some dominant theologians (especially the evangelical and neo-orthodox theologians) tend to theologize in universal terms as if to suggest that there is one universal reality perceptible by people irrespective of differences in geographical location, cultural and religious experience. But this view negates the nature of religion and human perception of reality.

Without entering into the disputation over what constitutes syncretism, it is evident from phenomenological standpoint that Christianity and, indeed all religions, are, each in its own way, composite of variety of forms of religious beliefs and practices.⁶⁵ Every religion has propensity for syncretism. So long as a religion is alive and addresses human needs, it cannot but change and adapt from time to time. Bolaji Idowu and Gregory Riley argue that

⁶³ Komolafe, 121.

⁶⁴ See Kato, 23-31; and Komolafe, 379-80

⁶⁵ The debate over the nature and what constitutes syncretism in theology and missiology has been persistent especially in the last three decades. Leonard Boff, the Roman Catholic theologian, noted that the dispute is complex, as the word has acquired diverse meanings that are not necessarily similar. Few of these meanings include an addition to the gospel, a mixture, an acceptance of “diverse paths for encountering divine reality,” the utilization of the “categories, cultural expressions, and traditions, of another religion,” and the adaptation, assimilation, reinterpretation, recasting of ideas, words, and practices from another religion. See Leonard Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 90-91.

religion is a dynamic phenomenon, which constantly adapts to the contextual particularity of the people it comes in contact with. Idowu puts this clearly thus:

There is no living religion that has not taken into itself elements from other religio-cultures. Influences from other cultures and contacts with immigrant religions have brought, not only changes in the complexion of religion, but also modification of its tenets. The most particular of religions have not been able to escape this factor: they have been forced by the nature of things to give and take elements to and from even those religions which they regard as their enemies or rivals.⁶⁶

Regarding the hybrid nature of Christianity, Riley avers, “Christianity was in fact something new, but it has drawn from and contained ideas very old.”⁶⁷ It is a synthesis of old ideas from the Ancient Near Eastern religious thought, Jewish thought, and Greco-Roman religious worldview.⁶⁸ This implies that change and adaptability are *sine qua non* to the continuing existence and relevance of every religion, including Christianity.

But the more pertinent question that one needs to address is: for whom is syncretism a problem? Is it a problem for the dominant groups that presumably think that they already have a pure and “finished” Christian theology (if there is such a thing), which others have to adopt or appropriate? Or is it a problem for people who are making their best effort to develop relevant and authentic theology that addresses the particularities of their context? Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, a Korean theologian, poignantly points to the issue underpinning the accusation of syncretism when she strikingly asks:

Why is the mixing of pagan religious elements (*syncretism*) into early Christianity from Hellenistic, Germanic, Celtic, and Syrian systems not a problem, whereas religious and cultic elements from outside Europe, such as those from the native aboriginal cultures (both North and South American, Pacific, and African) and the

⁶⁶ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 203.

⁶⁷ Gregory Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2001), 2.

⁶⁸ See Gregory Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins*; and *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity But Many: The Truth about Christian Origins* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

highly developed and literate systems in Asia (Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism etc), seem to pose such a threat? Do we detect a trace here of cultural/religious/political imperialism as well as a trace of good old Christendom supremacy?⁶⁹

Ng is clear that the preoccupation with the cries of syncretism is a creeping Christian crypto-imperialism that is desirous of trying to reestablish the “old Christendom supremacy.” It is a subtle attempt by a dominant group to claim absolute hegemony to determine a normative Christian theology and practice for all people. But if theology is locally conditioned and intrinsically provisional (*theologia in via*), as I believe it is, then the critique of syncretism has to be reconsidered in light of the adaptive nature of religion and the necessity to make Christianity relevant to people of diverse culture and history. Not only will this help to reevaluate the Western Christian tradition foisted on the Yoruba, it also will set in motion new directions that will engender authentic Christian self-expression in Yoruba milieu.

Charismatic/Pentecostal Preaching

The Pentecostal/Charismatic churches developed in Nigeria as a result of the British and North American Pentecostal missionary activities between 1920s and 1950s.⁷⁰ The first sets of the movement, consisting of the Apostolic Church, the Faith Tabernacle, the Apostolic Faith, and the Assemblies of God, were latent until the 1970s when a new wave of missionary activity sparked a revival movement in them. Even though the sociopolitical and economic improvement of the 1960s influenced its growth in the cities and urban areas, the unprecedented spread of the movement has been credited to the involvement of the Christian

⁶⁹ Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship: Issues of Indigenization and Contextualization,” in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 156 (italic added).

⁷⁰ Some scholars have attempted to differentiate Pentecostalism from the Charismatic movement. While the efforts are enlightening, I consider it necessary to treat the two movements together in this project based on their common beliefs and theological persuasions. Two of the recent publications on this issue are David Barrett, “The Worldwide Holy Spirit Renewal,” in *The Century of the Holy Spirit*, ed. Vinson Synan (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001); and Stanley Burgess, ed. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002).

Students' Unions in higher institutions.⁷¹ Since its emergent, the movement has introduced three preaching approaches, which to a degree have revived the spiritual landscape of the country, and spurred optimism in the midst of adversity.⁷²

The first type is evangelical preaching. Preachers of this stream take evangelism, founded on the biblical precept of Matthew 28:16-20, as the benchmark of preaching and consider the Church from the standpoint of a divine institution charged with the sole responsibility of faith sharing and soul-winning. William F. Kumuyi, founder and leader of the Deeper Life Bible Church in Nigeria, puts it this way: "Soul-winning is the greatest work you can ever be involved in. It's the most rewarding enterprise you can undertake. It's the work that gives joy in this life and brings reward in the world to come. It is work of the greatest consequences."⁷³ Central to the evangelical preaching is the transmission of the gospel without much regard to the context of the audience.

The mandate of this preaching style is essentially the salvation of this sinful age from the inevitable hell. Its theological content, for that reason, spins around *Heilgeschichte*, or salvation history: the goodness of humanity and creation at the beginning, fall of humanity and original sin, human depravity, repentance and faith in the work of Jesus Christ. It also emphasizes public piety and eschatological events such as the last judgment, rapture, millennial reign of God, and the reign of the anti-Christ.⁷⁴

This style of preaching surely has a remarkable appeal for evangelistic purposes and may have contributed to the unprecedented growth of the movement. Nevertheless, it is not

⁷¹ Matthew A. Ojo, "Deeper Christian Life Ministry: A Case Study of the Charismatic Movements in Western Nigeria," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 18, no. 2 (1988), 141-43.

⁷² Marshall, "Power in the Name of Jesus," 21.

⁷³ William F. Kumuyi, *Have Compassion for Them* (Lagos, Nigeria: Zoe Publishing 1975), 7.

⁷⁴ For further study on the beliefs of the Pentecostal movement, see Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987).

without some difficulty. It is narrow and contextually deficient. Chong-Yol Kim draws attention to this deficiency when he asks:

What does it mean to evangelize a nation? Do we succeed in evangelization if we actually succeed in turning 'Thirty Million to Christ' or Fifty Million to Christ'? Regardless of what goes on in the politics, how the society operates, what the economic situations are, whether or not there is corruption, whether organized forces of evil are tyrannically trampling on human rights...regardless of what happens to our neighbors, society, and nation if we only believe in Jesus – so that our souls are saved – has evangelization been realized?⁷⁵

Mike Okonkwo, founder and leader of Yeshua Ministry in Nigeria, also indicates the point at issue in his encounter with this preaching style:

Many Nigerians believed that all the Lord is interested in is our salvation. Once you are saved, our only focus from then on is getting into heaven. Few thought of their salvation as producing abundant life here and now. Another misconception was that pursuing excellence in any area should never be attempted; pursuing excellence was seen as carnal or worldly. "Our slogan was 'Repent or perish,' and nothing more was to be added."⁷⁶

It is a shortfall of the evangelical preaching, as implied in both Kim and Okonkwo's observations, to disregard social implications of the gospel in human life and society.

Although individual appropriation of the gospel is germane and fundamental, meaningful *euangelion* or the good news is holistic. It is the reign or realm of God, which encompasses the spiritual, social, and political aspects of life and the "vast order of God's creation."⁷⁷

The second type of Pentecostal preaching is doctrinal. According to Kurewa, doctrinal preaching concentrates on the "beliefs and teachings of the church."⁷⁸ This style of preaching, which became prominent in Yorubaland in 1970s through the ministry of the Faith

⁷⁵ Chong-Yol Kim, "Evangelization of the Nation and Mass gathering," 74, cited in Seong Soo Yuk, "Contextualization in Korean -American Preaching," D. Min project, Claremont School of Theology, 2004, 35.

⁷⁶ Mike Okonkwo, "Sustaining the Move of God," in Wagner, 59.

⁷⁷ Writing on "The Church in Society," the ethicist Paul Jersild, emphasises the holistic nature of the gospel. He argues that "the church's message has a comprehensive character" inasmuch as it addresses both the personal and social dimensions of life and the cosmic order. See Paul Jersild, *Making Moral Decisions: A Christian Approach to Personal and Social Ethics*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 78-95.

⁷⁸ Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity*, 90.

Tabernacle and later in Deeper Life Bible Church, is one of the dominant preaching patterns in Nigerian Pentecostalism today.⁷⁹

Both the evangelical and doctrinal styles of preaching have common emphasis on the centrality of the scripture in preaching. Evangelical preaching, however, aims at fostering regeneration (often referred to as “born-again” or “new birth” in the Pentecostal parlance) while doctrinal preaching nurtures the Christian faith. In other words, the basic distinguishing feature of doctrinal preaching is that unlike evangelical homily, it is directed mainly to Christians or those already connected with Christian churches. Its primary objective is to elucidate the fundamentals of Christian beliefs for spiritual formation and the enrichment and maturity of the life of the audience. Maybe this is why Kurewa argues that doctrinal preaching is a “teaching preaching.”⁸⁰ In most cases, it uses catechetical or instructional designs as its communication technique. This preaching stream often stresses issues such as sanctification and justification by faith, as well as ethical and moral issues. It is also given to challenging the social and immoral practices so as to cultivate holiness and purity of life among Christians.

Doctrinal preaching has a fundamental shortcoming. Even though it focuses on practical aspects of life and deeper spirituality, doctrinal preaching is a proclamation of the law. It often gravitates toward legalistic teaching and moral instructions as a result of its emphasis on public affirmation of “new birth” and ethical/moral purity on personal level. This emphasis may have unintended result of promoting separatism when it is not properly handled. Its advocates may have low spiritual and moral perception of Christians outside their fold as part of the sermon on *Holiness made Easy* by Kumuyi actually underscores.

⁷⁹ See Ojo, 141-62.

⁸⁰ Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity*, 90.

After God has told us what He will do, He tells us what we should do. We are to come out from among people who defile us. We should be separate. It is some years now since I came across this passage that instructs me to come out from among people that will defile me; from among habits that destroy and defile.⁸¹

It is true that the Christian faith has always been countercultural, and that must be emphasized. But when this countercultural nature is over stressed as in the exclusivist orientation of the holiness church, its effects on the Yoruba communal life are usually grave. Omoyajowo explains:

To separate Yoruba converts into a Christian village in order to preserve them from contamination by their kith and kin is to alienate them from their communal life, which meant, in effect, cultural and social death for such individuals. Religious devotion on the part of a Christian is not enough to lead to loosening of the traditional kinship ties of a society.⁸²

It can, of course, be argued that members of the “Christian village” loose nothing in terms of kinship since the Christian communities provide alternative tie for them. But what such claim fails to consider is that aside from being a reenactment of the “mission compound mentality” of the missionary days, Christian villages cannot replace natural kinship that shapes the people’s identity. Moreover, “when Christians overaccentuate their distinction from the culture surrounding them they wind up demonizing the world and pridefully thinking that they are not part of the sinful fallenness.”⁸³ Such sectarianism is nothing but spiritual hubris, which often renders the Christians alien and irrelevant to the culture they intend to reach.⁸⁴

The third stream of Pentecostal homily in Yorubaland is prosperity gospel. This is the latest and probably the most formidable of the movement’s preaching styles. Prosperity gospel is rooted in the romantic worldview that trusts in a “God who is able to set aside

⁸¹ William Kumuyi, *Holiness Made Easy* (Lagos, Nigeria: Zoe Publishing and Printing, 1983), 16.

⁸² Omoyajowo, *Religion, Society, and the Home*, 46.

⁸³ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 68.

⁸⁴ Bevans, 125.

natural process through miraculous interventions.”⁸⁵ Samuel Roberts, a North American theologian and ethicist, refers to this phenomenon as “thaumaturgical” message in his typology of the African American Christian ethics. The term is derived from the Greek word *thamatos*, which means miracle. As Roberts explains, a thaumaturgical message attempts to reorder the worldview of a believer in such a manner as to bring about material wealth.⁸⁶

This preaching paradigm emerged out of the confluence of three significant streams. First, it is directly influenced and shaped by the prosperity gospel of the North American Pentecostalism.⁸⁷ Second, it appeals to a rather pragmatic aspect of West African faith that asserts that the world of mystery is available for the benefits of the believers or cult devotees.⁸⁸ The mid-1980s economic decline in Nigeria constitutes the third source.⁸⁹ The model recognized the adaptive nature of Christianity and considered the Church from the perspective of mission imperative that is committed to participating in God’s dynamic action in the world. The purpose of the preaching is to “harness faith for very practical results, not the least of which is economic well-being.”⁹⁰

The problem of this preaching style is enormous and strangely, often not obvious. It is not uncommon among some prosperity preachers to use economic well-being as an incentive to holy living and a barometer to measure their followers’ level of faith and spirituality. They sometimes promote divine reciprocity whereby material success becomes a mark of God’s

⁸⁵ Tisdale, 85.

⁸⁶ Samuel Roberts, *African American Christian Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 176.

⁸⁷ Komolafe, 151.

⁸⁸ Roberts, 176.

⁸⁹ Komolafe, 151. The government of Nigeria adopted a radical political and economic policy otherwise known as Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in mid-1980s. This program unleashed untold economic hardship on the people and compelled several institutions, including the Church to devise alternative ways of adapting and surviving the austere period. For more information on SAP and its effects on the country and people, see Tunji A. Olagunju, Adele Jinadu, and Sam Oyovbaire, *Transition to Democracy in Nigeria (1985-1993)* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Safari Books with Spectrum Books, 1993).

⁹⁰ Roberts, 177.

favor while poverty represents a spell and a curse. This approach cannot but lead to spiritual manipulations and the diminution of “the spiritual realms to a transaction between clients and servers.”⁹¹ Besides, the style lacks theological depth inasmuch as it espouses literal application of the Bible, and overemphasizes human activity over and above God’s grace. This aspect has the tendency of promoting austere Christian living for seekers of materialism and tying God to the whim and caprices of prosperity preachers.⁹² What is more, some of the prosperity preachers detest traditional culture. Even though it exhibits features of contextualization, given the way it addresses the crucial needs of the Yoruba in time of economic hardship, prosperity gospel still leaves much to be desired. It is not far reaching enough as long as the practitioners continue to render insignificant the Yoruba tradition and culture in preaching.

In summary, I have analyzed the variety of preaching styles in Yorubaland. The analysis shows that some of the preaching strands are already embodying Yoruba religiocultural elements while others are dismissive of them. What the latter have yet to realize is that

each one of us thinks about God within the framework of the worldview provided by our culture. In order for faith to become foundational in our lives, it has to enter into dialogue with our culture. Otherwise, faith apart from culture is reduced to a set of rituals and principles of a bygone era to which we adhere through habit or religious nostalgia.⁹³

The question, then, is not so much about how Yorubaland is festooned with the beauty of Christianity, for that is obvious. Rather, the key issue is whether Christianity is rooted in Yoruba milieu as to eliminate the “double consciousness” that perennially manifests in the

⁹¹ Roberts, 77.

⁹² Roberts, 176.

⁹³ Michael Duggan, *The Consuming Fire: A Christian Introduction to the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 527.

lives of Yoruba people during acute life challenges. This concern, which is the focus of the next chapter, is what faith communities in Yorubaland need to seriously address.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXTUALIZATION IN PREACHING

In the last chapter, I explored some of the preaching practices in Yorubaland. This exploration indicates that despite the overwhelming presence of Christianity in Nigeria, preaching has yet to be adequately contextualized in Yorubaland. It is necessary, in view of this claim, to examine the principle of contextualization as a way to developing a theoretical framework for authentic and effective preaching among the Yoruba. To this end, this chapter surveys the theological movement of contextualization and discusses some of its homiletical implications and methodological principles.

Theological Movement of Contextualization

Contextualization has in recent times become one of the dominant concepts in theology.¹ Some scholars such as Orlando Costas noted quite rightly that it is a necessary theological process, which was regrettably neglected for too long to the detriment of Christian theology and mission.² In order to appreciate the significance of this theological approach, it is germane to first define the terminology.

Dean S. Gilliland, a professor of contextualized theology and African Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, defines contextualization as an attempt to interpret the unchanging Word of God through the cultural framework of a given people. He writes:

Contextualized theology...is the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the Word of God and the historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the lordship of Christ. As members of the body of Christ interpret the Word, using their own thoughts and

¹ Emmanuel Clapsis, "The Challenges of Contextual Theology," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 38, nos. 1-4 (1993): 71-79.

² See Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982).

employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.³

Bruce J. Nicholls, the New Zealand theologian, shares this view when he defines contextualization as “the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal forms meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and with their particular existential situations.”⁴ These scholars and many others of similar conviction emphasize the supracultural nature of the gospel. Their view represents the translation model of contextualization in Bevans’ typology of contextual theology.⁵

This definition has a fundamental presupposition that has been a perennial issue of debate in theological circles. It presupposes the existence of an “unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom” (as in Nicholls) or “the historic Christian truth” (as in Gilliland), which can be translated from one culture to another. Both Gilliland and Nicholls assume that it is possible to differentiate the invariant content of the gospel from cultural accoutrements. But the problem is how to sort out one from the other since, according to Bevans, “we cannot have access to the Gospel apart from some kind of human formulation.”⁶ “All attempts to reduce the supracultural content of revelation to a creed,” the North American missiologist, C. Peter Wagner, argues, “will naturally be colored by cultural context in which the creed is formulated.”⁷ What, then, is the core of the gospel that is inextricably embedded in culture?

³ Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 12-13.

⁴ Bruce J. Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization,” in *Let The Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Volume Papers and Responses /International Congress on World Evangelism, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publication, 1975), 647.

⁵ Bevans, 37-53.

⁶ Bevans, 43.

⁷ C. Peter Wagner, “Contextualizing Theology in the American Social Mosaic,” in *The Word among Us*, ed. Dean Gilliland, 230.

To ask differently, is it possible for human beings to apprehend God's activity apart from cultural and historical reality?

In view of the complexity involved in this question, Charles Taber provides another definition that does not focus on the notion of the existence of an unchangeable "Christian truth." He defines contextualization as an attempt to apprehend and explicate God's revelation within diverse historical contexts. For him, contextualization is not so much about adaptation of a sacrosanct theology to different contexts as about a reflection on divine revelation within the context of a given people. Taber puts it clearly thus:

Contextualization...is the effort to understand and take seriously the specific context of each human group and person on its own terms and in all its dimensions – cultural, religious, social, political, economic – and to discern what the Gospel says to people in that context. This requires a profound empirical analysis of the context in place of flippant or a priori judgment ...Contextualization tries to discover what the Scripture is saying to these people. In other words, contextualization takes very seriously the example of Jesus in the sensitive and careful way he offered each person a Gospel tailored to his or her own context.⁸

Taber insists on the present human experience, with a particular focus on all facets of human experience as the starting point of theology. For him, while the Scripture remains a valid source of God's revelation, it is not a rigid and closed canon of divine activity. The nature of the Scripture, being a product of the interaction of faith and context, makes it imperative for constant reinterpretation in light of continuous changing realities. The task of contextualization then demands greater awareness of the historical development and social change in the particularity of a people's context. It values the Scripture as much as the "sacredness of the historical context in terms of God's revelation" and sees theology as a

⁸ Charles Taber, "The Limit of Indigenization in Theology," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, eds. C. H. Kraft and T.N. Wisley (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1979), 146.

product of the interaction of God's revelation and human reality.⁹ Contextualization could in this regard be defined as a dynamic process by which different people critically reflect on God's revelation in light of the Scripture and within the uniqueness of their contexts. It is an attempt to understand the Christian faith in terms of one's particular context without any foreign theological imposition.

According to the Catholic theologian, Stephen Bevans, contextualization is both ancient and modern to Christian theology. It is in "many ways a radical departure from the notion of traditional theology, but at the same time it is very much in continuity with it. To understand theology as contextual is to assert something that is both old and new."¹⁰

Although contextualization as a term is relatively new, its theological underpinning is in fact fundamental to Christian theology and missiology.¹¹ It represents a critical hallmark that makes it possible for the gospel to be planted in different cultural contexts. Max Stackhouse submits:

The church over the ages, as it moves into the Greco-Roman world, north into Europe, east to the Slavic and Middle Eastern lands, and subsequently around the world, has contextualized the faith wherever it went, even if missionaries sometimes resisted indigenization and wanted to preserve the exact forms of confession and practice they brought with them.¹²

Prior to the "self-conscious awareness" of contextualization, the process was integral to the planting of Christian message in the life and world of those who embraced it.¹³

Historically, however, contextualization, as theological category, was recently introduced and officially acknowledged in theological movement. It was first used in 1972 at

⁹ Bevans, 5.

¹⁰ Bevans, 3.

¹¹ Bevans, 7. See also Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 121-23.

¹² Max L. Stackhouse, "Contextualization, Contextuality, and Contextualism," in *One Faith, Many Cultures*, ed. Ruy O. Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 5.

¹³ Jones, 121-23.

a meeting of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to advocate for the much-needed reform in theological education.¹⁴ The term represents an epistemological break and a paradigm shift in theological and missiological thinking.¹⁵ The TEF report for that year states *inter alia*:

“Contextualization” implies all that is involved in the familiar term indigenization, but seeks to press beyond it to take into account the process of secularity, technology and the struggle for human justice, which characterized the historical movement of nations in the Third World.¹⁶

As this report partly indicates, the advocates of contextualization aim at widening the horizon of theological enterprise beyond the frontier of indigenization.¹⁷ For them, indigenization, which is an older term, is limited to cultural and religious dimensions of human experience. It is past-oriented and connotes the infusion of foreign theology with local features. In contrast, contextualization is oriented to the present and addresses not only cultural and religious dimensions of human life, but also the social, political, technological, cultural, and economic aspects of society. It develops an existential approach to theological reflection and addresses the whole spectrum of human experience not just in the Third World, as the TEF report suggests, but in every human context.¹⁸

So then, contextualization of theology addresses two foci of experiences. It addresses the church traditions and the Scripture on the one hand, and incorporates the present reality

¹⁴ Ruy O. Costa, “Introduction: Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization,” in *One Faith, Many Cultures*, ed. Ruy O. Costa, xii.

¹⁵ See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 420-32.

¹⁶ Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding: A Handbook for Christian Communication Across Cultural Landscapes* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 24.

¹⁷ Shoki Coe, a Taiwanese theologian and Nikos A. Nissiotis of the Greek Orthodox Church are credited for introducing contextualization into theological and missiological debates at the 1972 meeting of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Church. Their concern was to call attention the paradigm shift in theological reflection from a static propositional truth to the broad spectrum of human existential realities. See Arthur F. Glasser, “Old Testament Contextualization: Revelation and Its Environment,” in *The Words Among Us*, ed. Dean Gilliland, 33.

¹⁸ See Bevans, 26.

of the wider community into theological reflection on the other. But, while being faithful to both experiences, contextualization refocuses theological reflection from the past to contemporary experience.¹⁹ It is responsive to the past, grounded in the present, and open to the future.²⁰ Contextualization is, in this regard, a radical departure from traditional approaches as it aims at developing theological approaches “that would shift the attention from a rigid, almost verbal loyalty to traditional and confessional statements constructed from the Bible” to the contemporary context.²¹

In *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans identified the epistemological break of contextualization when he compared it to traditional theology. Traditional approaches, Bevans notes, conceive theology as *theologia perennis*, an “objective science of faith” that is unmitigated by human experience and social location. Contextualization exposes this mythical claim by arguing that theology is a constructive work of human imagination that gives witness to the nature of God. It presents theology as necessarily subjective human reflection on divine activity in history.²² In contrast to traditional theology, which presents theology as a finished product, contextualization expresses the situational nature of theology. The latter refuses to endorse the idea of theology as a static package, which only has to be explained, but argues that theology is locally conditioned and intrinsically provisional (*theologia in via*).²³ It places the continuing and renewing presence

¹⁹ Bevans, 5.

²⁰ Bevans, 5. See also Costas, 4-5.

²¹ Glasser, 32. It appears, according some proponents of contextual theology, that the theological paradigm shift to contextualization occurred in mid-1960s after Vatican II when theology started to acquire new hermeneutical orientation by focusing on existential issues rather than propositional truth which characterizes scholasticism and salvation history of traditional theology. See Bevans, 9-15; and Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 716-25.

²² Bevans, 3, 8.

²³ Concerning the local and provisional natures of theology see Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1985); Joseph Spae, “Missiology as Local Theology and

of God in history and in creation. Being a dynamic reflection on the praxis of the church in the changing world, the missiologist, David Bosch, avers, contextualization insists that theology is essentially “experimental and contingent” upon context.²⁴ It would then be fair, in agreement with the Greek Orthodox theologian, Emmanuel Clapsis, to suggest that contextual theology emerged as a reaction against traditional theology, which in large measure “contributed to an ever-increasing gulf between ‘saying’ and ‘doing’ theology.”²⁵ In so doing, contextualization attempts to harmonize theory and praxis by insisting that theology has to be relevant and meaningful to human existential struggle. The implications of this theological approach for homiletics cannot be overemphasized.

Contextualization in Preaching

The idea of contextualization in preaching is to frame the gospel message in language and communication forms appropriate and meaningful to the local culture, and to focus the message upon the crucial issues in the lives of the audience. This idea is imperative for three basic reasons. First, the process expresses the incarnational nature of the gospel. One of the foundational doctrines of the church is incarnation: that God has in Jesus Christ shared totally in our human reality. Karl Barth, the notable twentieth-century neo-orthodox German theologian, argues that God is “wholly other,” an utterly transcendent Being whose nature and identity are unknowable to humanity.²⁶ The unknowability of God, for Barth, is essentially due to *finitum non capax infiniti* – the finite has no capacity for the infinite. “There is no way from us to God,” Barth claims, “not even via *negativa* not even via *dialectica* nor

Interreligious Encounter,” *Missiology* 7 (1979): 479-500; and Krikor Hakeblian, “The Problem of Contextualization,” *Missiology* 11 (1983): 95-111.

²⁴ Bosch, 427; and Costas, 423-24.

²⁵ Clapsis, 71-71. See also Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976); and Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis – Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1987).

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T Thomson (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 36, 46.

paradoxa. The god who stood at the end of some human way would not be God.”²⁷ Yet, as Barth explains further, the hidden God voluntarily reveals the divine self to humanity through Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The proclaimed word (preaching), Barth maintains, is a continuing manifestation of Godself in history.²⁸ In consonant with this train of theological thought, Bevans states:

Incarnation is a process of becoming particular, and in and through the particular the divinity could become visible and in some way (not fully but in some way) become graspable and intelligible.”²⁹

Rene Padilla makes it more concrete.

The incarnation unmistakably demonstrates God’s intention to make himself known from within the human situation. Because of the very nature of the Gospel, we know this Gospel only as a message contextualized in culture.³⁰

The most viable way of continuing this process of incarnation is to en flesh the Word in the world by making the Christian message speak the language and address the current existential and cultural experience of the people.³¹ Indeed, the gospel conveys divine grace most authentically when it is proclaimed as a divine Word directed to an individual or a people at a specific time and in a definite place. Contextualization in preaching helps to achieve this incarnation principle as it proclaims the gospel as the Word of God that is perpetually “with us” and for us.

The second necessity of contextualization in preaching is the nature of the Scripture. Modern biblical scholarship is increasingly demonstrating that the Bible is inherently plurivalent, multivocal, multicultural, and dynamic in nature. For instance, Justin Ukpong, a

²⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1928), 177.

²⁸ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 17.

²⁹ Bevans, 12.

³⁰ Rene Padilla, “The Contextualization of the Gospel,” in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1979), 286.

³¹ Bevans, 12.

Nigerian biblical scholar and theologian, argues that the Scripture is plurivalent because it has the capacity to address diverse situations and contexts across time and space while maintaining its ancient roots.³² Current scholarly study of the Scripture establishes that the Bible is a dynamic phenomenon, which contains somewhat unrelated cultures and traditions, addresses diverse human experiences, and speaks multi-vocally. As Harrison Elliot, the North American religion educator, extensively demonstrated in his book, *Can Religious Education be Christian?* the Bible is a documentation of the progressive revelation of God in relation to dynamic human experiences across time and space.³³ Bevans states it this way:

When we recognize the importance of context for theology, we are also acknowledging the absolute importance of context for the development of both scripture and tradition. The writings of scripture and the content, practices, and feel of tradition did not simply fall from the sky. They themselves are products of human beings and *their* contexts. They have been developed by human personality and human circumstances. As we study the scripture and tradition, we not only have to be aware of their inevitable contextual nature; we have to read and interpret them within our own context as well.³⁴

Correspondingly, not only is it imperative for preaching to be attentive to the “inevitable contextual nature” of the gospel, it also has to embody the contextual particularities of the audience. Any preaching that will not name God out of biblical narrative into the present world and make God speak in vernacular so that people will hear God in their own languages and existential experiences is unlike the dynamic nature of the Scripture. It is in this regards that contextualization in preaching is a necessity. It recognizes the continuing presence of

³² Justin S. Ukpong, “Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Issues and Challenges from African Readings,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town*, Justin S. Ukpong, et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 17.

³³ Harrison S. Elliott, *Can Religious Education be Christian?* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1953).

³⁴ Bevans, 5. See also Justin Ukpon, “New Testament Hermeneutics in Africa: Challenges and Possibilities,” *Neotestamentica* 35, nos. 1-2 (2001): 157.

God's activity and intentionally attends to current context of the listeners as the arena of God's revelation.

The third necessity of contextualization in preaching is the desire to shape the gospel to specific concerns of the listeners. Contextualization in preaching is not just sensitive to but actually addresses the sociopolitical changes, cultural impulse, and specific crucial issues in the lives of the hearers.³⁵ This issue points to the vital role history and culture play in human knowing and apprehension of reality.

History and culture form and inform one's perception and worldview. "To be religious," the North American religions educator, C. Ellis Nelson argues, "one has to be in certain tradition. Traditions are not created out of thin air; they are historically rooted in men, movement, and events, which in turn are historically conditioned."³⁶ For Nelson, historical and cultural realities permeate every aspect of human understanding and dictates human values. This is why he (Nelson) argues that faith is a culture or tradition that is passed to the new generation through conscious communication and socialization. J. H. Bavinck says: "Culture is religion made visible; it is religion actualized in the innumerable relations of daily life."³⁷ Culture is so pervasive and influential in human knowing and understanding so much so that Aylward Shorter contends that it is impossible to hear the gospel and come to faith without culture.³⁸ This allows us to critically examine the truth claim of any belief system and to understand that religious beliefs are neither transhistorical nor value neutral.

³⁵ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 18.

³⁶ C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1967), 68.

³⁷ Johan H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 57.

³⁸ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 5.

The awareness of the influence of the sociocultural milieu on human knowing is significant for preaching. It makes it imperative for preachers to prepare their sermons with the full awareness of the life situation and concerns of their parishioners rather than using generic human experience. Tisdale conceded this fact when she claims that no single sermon is capable of sufficiently addressing the deepest need of different congregations insofar as each congregation is uniquely shaped by its own culture and experience.³⁹ One may, therefore, conclude that contextualization is not optional but imperative for a meaningful, intelligible, and responsive preaching. What then is the methodology of contextualization in preaching?

Methodology of Contextualization in Preaching

In the long history of preaching various points of departure have been chosen which point to the hermeneutical grounding of each preaching paradigm. For instance, biblical or textual preaching may adopt the historical critical method of biblical interpretation and attempt to interpret contemporary life in light of certain understandings of the biblical text. Methodologically, the paradigm moves from “text-to-context” and consists of three steps: textual selection, interpretation (exegesis), and application.⁴⁰ Such approach gives very little consideration to the contemporary context in sermon construction except, in the words of the homiletician, Thomas Long, to “inform the congregation about the result of the preacher’s personal exegesis of the text.”⁴¹

The need for contextualization in preaching makes it imperative for preachers to explore other methods that will give considerable attention to the preaching context. This

³⁹ Tisdale, 41.

⁴⁰ Tisdale, 99.

⁴¹ Long, 79.

requires a shift in the traditional procedure from “text-context” paradigm to “context-text-context” configuration so as to allow the contemporary context to play crucial roles throughout the different phases of sermon crafting and delivery. Long puts it clearly thus:

The preacher goes to the biblical text *from* the congregation and, indeed *with* the congregation. The congregation’s struggle to be human and faithful to Christ in the contemporary world has been the context in which the interpretation of the text has taken place. Though the preacher bears responsibility for giving it voice, exegesis involves a conversation between the biblical text and the whole community of faith.⁴²

In the preparation of contextual sermon, exegesis and application are a single process. It is a dynamic and dialogical relationship between the biblical text and the reality of the audience. While the Scripture may be fundamental to contextual preaching, the reality of the audience provides the window through which the gospel is proclaimed. Tisdale argues: “Exegesis of the congregation and its subculture is not peripheral to proclamation, but central to its concerns.”⁴³ The reality and subculture of the audience substantially inform the content and design of contextual sermon; they constitutes the seed of the gospel is which is already on the local ground waiting to be watered so as to sprout.

Bearing this in mind, the methodology of contextualization in preaching consists of three essential principles: interpretation of the preaching context, interpretation of the text and context, and the bridging of the world of the biblical text and the context of the congregation. While it is theoretically possible to delineate each principle, they are not discrete in actual practice. They are inextricably intertwined, drawing upon one another, flowing into each other, and building upon each other.

⁴² Long, 79.

⁴³ Tisdale, 48.

Interpretation of Preaching Context

The first principle of the contextual sermon is the analysis of the preaching context. This principle enables the preacher to appraise him/herself with the context of the congregation. The preacher must grasp the people's imaginative conception and participate in their concrete situation and context before effective preaching can take place.⁴⁴ This essentially entails critical analysis of the local situation with the purpose of apprehending the complexity of the existential reality of the congregation so as to design a timely and appropriate gospel for the situation. Fred Craddock, the North American homiletician, stresses this fact when he writes:

Much hoopla to the contrary, the most effective preachers in this or any generation are pastors, whose names we may or may not ever know. This is not a comment on oratorical skills nor is it a broad benediction on every pulpit effort by pastors. *It is rather a recognition of the central importance of knowing one's hearers, a fact which makes it possible for sermon to have that irreplaceable source of power: appropriateness.*⁴⁵

Preaching can only have the mark of "appropriateness" when the preacher is intentionally immersed in the context of the audience, attentive to what is, and sensitive to their conceptual worldview. A case in point is the prophetic books, which are expressive of the sociopolitical and religiocultural contexts of their production. Amos, the eight-century BCE prophet of Israel, aptly exemplifies this principle. Prior to his prophetic ministry, Amos was immersed in the context of Jeroboam II due to his trading activities and ambassadorial role in northern Israel.⁴⁶ This experience enabled Amos to witness and carefully analyze the placated religiosity, sociopolitical injustices, and economic imbalances that marked the rural and

⁴⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, *Imagining A Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 120.

⁴⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 91-92 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Marvin Sweeney expresses this opinion when he claims: "The need to pay tribute to northern Israel would account for Amos' presence in Beth El at the time of the festival of Sukkoth." See Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 192.

urban landscape of northern kingdom of Israel and the surrounding nations. Hence, he unequivocally proclaimed: "...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5: 24 NRSV).

Similarly, experiential immersion into preaching context will not only encourage preachers to actually participate in the existential situation, but also inform other steps of sermon preparation. It will, for instance, inform the choice of biblical text, interpretation of both text and context, selection of sermon theme or topic, theological content, as well as sermon design, language, symbols, illustrations, and application. This implies that the content and form of the message are contingent upon the issues arising from the preaching context.

Interpretation of Text and Context

The second principle of contextualization in preaching is the interpretation of text and context. The process of textual interpretation depends largely on the preacher's understanding of the relation of the text to the context. While the preacher may acknowledge the original context of the biblical text, the preaching context provides the hermeneutical lens by which the text is essentially interpreted. It is pertinent to note here that the hermeneutical process of textual interpretation is never neutral in contextual preaching. It is rather unapologetically subjective. It encourages privileged hermeneutical principle that interprets the biblical text from the perspective of the congregation.⁴⁷ The text has to be interpreted

⁴⁷ In privileged hermeneutical principle every interpretation is perspectival since textual reading is framed by the reader's history and culture. For instance, Werner Jeanrond stresses that textual interpretation "demands our active participation in recreating the text in question. It demands that we lend of our reality to the text so that it can become real for us. Understanding then comes about when these two realities meet: the reality of the reader and the reality of the text." In this regard and as modern hermeneutic claims the interpreter always brings some pre-understanding, perspectives, agendas, biases, and other sensitivities to any interpretative process because human epistemology is culturally conditioned. For further study on the concept of privileged hermeneutical principle in textual interpretation, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 25-44; Paul

within the exigencies, problems, and the conceptual categories of the immediate audience.

Thus, a creative confrontation is brought about, in which the text itself declares and expounds its message for a particular situation.

The biblical parables are illustrative of the subjective nature of textual interpretation. In *What are They Saying About Parables?* David Gowler contends that interpretations of parables are inherently influenced by the social and existential location of the interpreter.

Parable can never be understood or explained outside of the link to the concrete situation of both the creator and hearer/reader. The hearer/reader is not a telegraph operator who must decode and receive the original message and context. There is never a ready-made message that is transmitted from one to another; it is a construction, like ideological bridge that is constructed in the process of their interaction. In some sense, parables do not merely “reflect” situation; they assist readers in organizing situation and, indeed, transforming them.⁴⁸

A similar case could, admittedly, be made for other biblical genres but the dynamic and polyvalent nature of parables more concretely demonstrates the role social and existential locations play in biblical interpretation. It shows that for the most part, biblical interpretation takes on the contextual particularities of the interpreter/hearer. For instance, the dominant view on the parable of the rich fool in Luke 9: 16-21 is that the narrative demonstrates how a person should be “rich toward God” by serving God daily.⁴⁹ But the narrative has different appropriation when considered in light of the communal and relational contexts of the Yoruba. The action of the rich man is, in this case, ultra virus to the social and communal life of the people. It amounts to insensitivity to the need of others and a rupture of the communal

Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 139; Stephen L. McKenzie, and Stephen R. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 230; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Deopel, ed. John Cumming and Garrett Barden, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 258; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁴⁸ David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 103.

⁴⁹ See Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 109.

rhythm of life.⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that the text should be uncritical of the preaching context but to underline that the particularities of the preaching context, in its different forms and faces, should provide hermeneutical lens with which the text can be read.

Integration of Two Horizons

The third and probably the most critical principle of contextualization in preaching is the integration of the context of the biblical text and the present context. It is at this stage both the biblical text and contemporary reality engage in mutual and critical dialog. This involves a creative bridging of the actual gap between the text and the preaching context. Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to this principle as the “fusion of two horizons,” that is, the horizons of the biblical text and that of the contemporary historical reality.⁵¹ Although part of the fusion should have occurred during the interpretation of the text, given that exegesis and application are interwoven in contextual preaching, it still has to be brought to sharp focus at this stage of sermon preparation and delivery. This requires relevant hermeneutical points of contact that will enable the hearer to appropriate the focus of the sermon in light of their

⁵⁰ For how the Yoruba communal life provides the hermeneutical key for the interpretation of this parable, see the full text of the sermon on *Raptured Rhythm of Life* in Chapter 5, Sermon 3, pages 105-114 of the project.

⁵¹ Gadamer uses the phrase in *Truth and Method* to articulate his hermeneutical concept as a philosophical discipline, which promotes human understanding and human self-understanding. He analyzes human understanding by using the example of text-interpretation. Following Martin Heidegger's insight into the role of “pre-judgments” in the process of understanding, Gadamer argues that the process of text-understanding is always fuelled by the reader's “pre-understanding,” social location, and by his/her interest in participating in the meaning of the text. For him, as for Heidegger, the ultimate purpose of text-understanding for a reader is the material agreement with the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. It is when the two horizons sufficiently blend together that text-understanding occurs. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 258; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). For further reading on this subject see also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); and Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

historical context. The success of this movement depends largely on the creativity, imagination, and ingenuity of each preacher.⁵²

For example, the social relation and communal life of the Yoruba are likely relevant hermeneutical points of contact for preaching the parable of the rich fool in Yoruba setting. This is so because the communal ethos of the Yoruba will underline the socioeconomic implications of the parable in a closely knitted community. It will show how the extreme individualism of the rich fool is inimical to human communality and relationality. Contrary to the individualism and self-absorption of the man, the Yoruba cultural ethos espouses the spirit of collective responsibility, generosity, and sharing.

Equally important to the integration of the biblical text and congregational context is the linguistic frame of reference of the sermon. Here, as in other parts of contextual preaching preparation, the preacher ought to employ linguistic expressions, symbols, images, and metaphors that are reflective of the local context and capable of engendering adequate comprehension of the message. A contextually sensitive preacher in Yorubaland for instance, may have to draw on Yoruba songs, myth, sayings, and proverbs, which encapsulate the people's primal wisdom and vistas into ultimate reality.

Henry Mitchell stresses the need for use of local expression in preaching in *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*. He claims that the gospel is understood and appropriated better when it is declared in the vernacular, literary, and symbolic expressions of the audience.⁵³ Tisdale expresses this metaphorically: "In the ordinary clay of local

⁵² For further study on the significance and use of analogy and imagination in preaching, see Stephen Farris, *Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); and Troeger, *Imagining A Sermon*.

⁵³ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 20.

experience contextual preaching finds the stuff pots are made of, and uses it to shape the earthen vessel capable of conveying the priceless treasures of the gospel.”⁵⁴ This is not to claim that the content of sermons is unimportant but to affirm that the quality of language is essential to preaching. The biblical scholar, James Mays, alludes to Prophet Amos adept use of the array of communication devices available in Israel’s culture and oral traditions.

Amos knew the art of appropriating a variety of ...speech forms as the vehicle of what he had to say. His speeches displayed a remarkable skill at using all the devices of oral literature available in Israel’s culture. He sang a funeral dirge for Israel in anticipation of its doom (5:1-2), and formulated woe-saying as a way of marking certain kinds of actions as those which lead to death (5:18; 6:1; 5:7). He used several forms that belonged to the priest to mimic and attack the cult of the nations (4:4f; 5:4, 21-24). He was especially adept at the employment of forms of speech that appear in the riddle, comparisons, and popular proverbs of the folk wisdom...He argued with the logic of proverbs (3:3-6) and used comparison and riddles to make his point (2:9; 3:12; 5:2, 7, 19, 21; 6:12; 9:9).⁵⁵

Similarly, when preaching rides on the communication devices of a local context it will not only improve the quality of the gospel but also facilitate listeners’ understanding.

In summary, I have discussed the theological movement, preaching insights, and methodological principles of contextualization in this chapter. The underlying thesis of the chapter is that contextualization is a preaching necessity as sermons will likely be richer and more effective when preachers are acquainted with and incorporate elements of the preaching situation into sermon content, design, and delivery. This thesis is demonstrated in the next chapter through the analysis of four sermons that are intentionally designed to accentuate some elements of Yoruba context.

⁵⁴ Tisdale, 133.

⁵⁵ James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 5-6.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXTUAL SERMON SAMPLES

The preceding chapter has dealt with the theological movement and preaching insights of contextualization. It also discusses three crucial principles necessary for the design and development of contextual sermons. The discussion would, however, remain in the realm of abstract principle unless they are concretely demonstrated. Thus, this chapter presents and analyzes four contextual sermon samples as a way of concretizing the insights. The four sermon samples address communal value, socioeconomic liberation, ecclesiology, and problem of evil in Yorubaland. The sermons do not, by any means, represent absolute forms to be emulated but exemplify how contextual preaching could integrate faith and culture among a people. The full text of each sermon is followed by an analysis that identifies the context, states both the focus and function statements, and discusses the contextual elements of the sermon.

Full Text of Sermon 1 The Way Out of the Deep (based on Psalm 91: 1-5)

Some years ago, I met a young man whose ordeal left an indelible mark on my perception of evil. Prior to this time, my view of evil was more theoretical than practical. For the most part, my theological education conditioned me to see evil purely as a conceptual philosophical category rather than a menacing reality in society. The tale of the young man ruptured this naïve perception and allows me to apprehend evil as a dangerous phenomenon in human society.

The man strolled into my offices at about 4 p.m. on this fateful day, desperately seeking for help. He never sought material help like money, food, shelter, clothing, or job. Rather, he looked for how to be liberated from the *ogun idile* and *ide esu* (familial curse and satanic bondage) that held him bound. He asked for freedom from spiritual bondage that had taken him to several unpleasant places like wild wind. Although young in age, the man was depressed, emaciated, pale, haggard, and unkempt because of the too many perils he had encountered in life.

After brief exchange of compliments and simple hospitality, the man narrated one of the most troubling ordeals I've ever heard in my life. He told me that he was born into a fairly comfortable family of eight children, attended one of the Universities in town and graduated with Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting. He did the mandatory one-year Youth Service and subsequently secured a well-paid job with a Bank through his family connection. Shortly thereafter the man found the love of his life, got married, and began his own family. From all indications, the young man had everything going well for him and was poised to becoming a profitable and respectable member of society.

His easy ride in life was short lived however. True to the Yoruba saying that *Esu* (Satan) always lurks in pleasant places, the tide of life suddenly turned against him and left irreversible trail of untold pain and sorrow in his life. His cascading calamity began when he lost his lovely wife and kids to a ghastly motor accident in one day. The event left a big vacuum in his life even though he did not consider it unusual. He saw it as one of those unfortunate incidences that could happen to anyone so, he gathered the pieces of his life together after some period of mourning, and went back to work with an undeterred hope for a better future.

But in hindsight, the man wished he had *oju inu* (inner eyes) to see the future. He wished he knew that the unfortunate death of his family was just a tip of the iceberg in the chain of events that later happened to him. We sometime wish we could see into the future so as to avoid actions that will initiate calamity in our lives. But human destiny is a top secret unknown to any one of us. This is why the Yoruba often say *b'ori ba mọ'busun i ba tun bẹ se* (had ori known its final resting place ori would have taken care of it).

Meanwhile, let us proceed with the story of the young man. Soon after returning to work, there was a big financial scam at the man's work place. And quite unfortunately, he was arrested, charged, and imprisoned for a number of years for financial malpractices along with some of his colleagues. But a couple of years later, the bank management regrettably realized that their victim was innocent of the scam. He was acquitted and compensated. But apology or no apology, compensation or no compensation, the deed had already been done. His dream had been considerably impaired as his wasted years in prison were irredeemable. But that is not the end of the story. While he was exonerated from the financial scam and hoped to go ahead with the residue of his life, the forces of evil intensified their plot to put him completely out of circulation.

For the time being, the man established an auditing firm with the little *gba ma binu* (compensation) he got from the Bank. But it appears that his *ori* despised success because the devil unleashed another calamity upon him at the time his firm was gaining reputation in town. This time some desperate and greedy people kidnapped him for money rituals. But when his kidnappers discovered through *Ifa* that their victim couldn't be used for money ritual on the ground that he was an accursed person, he was hypnotized and released so that he would not recollect or identify them.

What a sorrowful life one might say! This man's experience exemplifies deadly encounter with the forces of evil that delights in wrecking the lives of innocent and impressionable people. Such activities are prevalent in human society. The Yoruba say: *eni ija o ba ni pe ra re l'okunrin* (it is only a person who has not experienced war calls himself a man). The man saw himself in a deep – a deep that had destroyed a considerable part of his life and left him with depression and ghost-like existence. Such an evil has swallowed many people and still lurks in the dark for many more. No wonder, by the time the man finished his close-to-two-hour story he looked at me with passion and expectancy and asked: "Pastor, can't you see that I'm in bondage? I am enveloped in a deep that has profoundly ruined my life. Is there anything you can do for me? I sincerely beg you Pastor, how can I be liberated from this deep?"

I must confess that I'm not sure I was able to be of any help to this man because I never saw him again. What I know, however, is that his story along with my experience and similar pathetic stories I have heard especially through the popular Kolawole Olawuyi's Saturday radio program *Iri Aye* (Experiences of Life), convince me that evil is not just a mental concept or systemic oppression in society. It is much more than that. Evil is real, outrageous, and merciless. It walks on the street and subways, menacing and destroying innocent lives. It is a scary and formidable force of darkness that subverts human pursuits and threatens human life.

Since I met this man, his desperate quest for the way out of the deep has made a deep impression on me. How on earth can human beings be freed from the cold hands of the wicked ones that inflict pain and terrorize destiny? How can we be liberated from the deep that sometimes attempts to strangle us? How can we be extricated from the deep that

entraps us in dungeons where we desperately search for escape route? Oh yes, how can we gain our freedom from the numerous snares and webs that cover our path to success? How can the evil monster that terrorizes our family be put to permanent sleep? How? How can we break the circle of misfortunes that seems to have turned our lives into punching bags? Dear friends, what is the way out the snaring deep?

The deep represents many things for me. It is a terrible situation that challenges human life, a state of non-being that makes no rational sense. It is a consequential and bitter condition where hordes of invisible forces assemble like thick cloud to shatter human hopes and dreams; a negative tide that surges against life with an overwhelming power. Have any of you ever experienced such an awful state of being?

It may be true that none of us have experienced something close to the young man's ordeal. But some of us are currently experiencing one deep or the other – a deep that gravely unsettles us. Many among us are groaning under severe bondage and struggling very hard to gain freedom. I want such people to know that the experience is not peculiar to them. As a matter of fact, I have at one time or the other experienced the crushing power of this deep and I must confess that it is not coveting, neither is it funny nor illusory. It is real, scary, and tormenting. It is overwhelming like a mighty ocean! It is an experience much like a hungry leopard that tears its helpless prey apart. To disregard this crippling deep is to be deluded and susceptible to untimely death.

Many are the deeps that surge against us in our community. Some of them are obvious, some are subtle, and others are latent. Some of them are easily surmountable, other are resilient. The gravest deep in our immediate community are spiritual forces of darkness. These are the witches, wizards, demons, *abiku*, and wicked people within our community. In

Ephesians 6: 13 Apostle Paul called these the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” and “spiritual forces in heavenly places.” Our forbears call them “*awon emi okunkun ti j ‘enia o sowo ma j ‘ere*” (the spirits of darkness that obstruct human progress). These forces of darkness shatter hopes and dreams; inflict wretchedness, alcoholism, and incurable afflictions. They also deplete family resources. They sometimes thwart human progress, cause stagnation, hatred, and untimely death.

It is no secret that many of these spirit beings and forces of darkness are threatening our society. Indeed, many have been inescapably caught in the sadistic activities of mysterious beings. Examples of the work of the powers abound around us. What then is the way out of this deep?

It is customary in our society to consult *Babalawo* or find respite in magic, charms, and amulets in situations like this. Some people will traverse the land to renew and increase their spiritual powers. For others still, *etutu and ebo* (sacrifices) are the solution. But all these are futile efforts because they are nothing but the snares of the devil and instruments of further enslavement.

Let me present you with another way; a more reliable, dependable, and eternally trustworthy way out of the deep. The book of Psalms provides the answer we are searching for. It recounts the protective and delivering assurance of Olodumare before whom all powers in heaven and on earth tremble. *Se bi Sango ba n pa’raba to n fa’roko ya, bi ti’gi nla kp.*¹ Psalm 91: 1-5 says,

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;

¹ This saying cannot be given precise translation but it means that even though Sango’s power is great and destructive, it is limited in many ways.

my God in whom I trust.”
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Before we look at the solution the psalmist proffers, let us first examine the world of the text.

The world of the psalmist seems to correspond to our community in many ways. For one, it is a fear-gripping and scary world like ours. A world where arrows fly in the day, pestilence lurks in the dark at night, and devastation, like locust, wastes the land at noonday. It is an insecure world, where calamity traverses the landscape and leaving sorrow and pain behind. The world is full of unpleasant past, a troubling present, and a bleak and uncertain future.

Furthermore, death was a terror in this world. Death robs thousands of households their loved ones and inflicts paralyzing fear on survivors. Indeed, the psalmist’s world is much like a swampy deep where victims yelled out for help but no one was neither willing nor capable to help for fear of being caught in the web; a web that consumes and swallows both the feeble and the valiant. It is a dreadful world of evil where human help is of no avail.

Yet, the psalmist finds help in God where all human help fails. The psalmist proclaims divine deliverance for those who have been caught in the snare of evil and protection for those who are being terrorized by arrows, pestilence, and death. The Nigerian Christian actor, Mike Bamiloye, once demonstrated the powers of Olodumare in his movie, *The gods are Dead*. Bamiloye showed how in a fierce contest with the seven gods of Muwonleru, Olodumare won and liberated all the inhabitants.

Olodumare is undoubtedly the sure deliverer, the mighty fortress that possesses unparalleled power to rescue out of the deep. Olodumare is the impregnable fortification that protects from the dark deep of darkness that lurks around. In verse one, the psalmist proclaimed Olodumare as a mighty fortress, the rescuer of the helpless, and a parent with long and strong arms to rescue from the gallows. Such a proclamation expresses a sure assurance in Olodumare who alone has powers not only to pull out of the deep but also to subdue all forces that threaten life. This is the way out of whatever deep that may be menacing our life and existence.

Are you in one deep or another? Olodumare is the way out. Call on Olodumare, the all-powerful God, today and you shall begin to experience the most exhilarating moments of your life. Other ways or powers last for a while but Olodumare remains a lasting shelter. As I conclude this message, I invite as many of us as are undergoing one deep or the other to consider living in the shelter of this God before whom all evil- wrenching spirit beings tremble. Come at this moment and abide in the shadow of the impregnable mighty fortress for protection and deliverance.

Analysis of Sermon 1: A Sermon on the Problem of Evil

Focus Statement

While evil is a consuming and overwhelming reality in our community and human help may be insufficient or non-existent, we can be confident in Olodumare who is a mighty presence and an impregnable fortress in time of trouble.

Function Statement

The function of the sermon is to acknowledge the horrendous evil that ravages the context of the audience, help them to name and identify the causes, and disabuse their minds

from relying on human help. While human beings can provide comfort and fellowship at the time of suffering and distress, they are incapable of rescuing from the forces of darkness. In this regard, the sermon encourages absolute faith in Olodumare, the Supreme Being, who alone is capable of protecting and rescuing from evil forces.

Context and Contextualization

The sermon is designed for Methodist Church Nigeria, Aroromakinde in Ibadan. Aroromakinde is a rural area in Ibadan. The Church comprises of farmers and few elementary and high school students from adjacent villages. Having worked in this church for six months, I noticed that regardless of the people's profession of Christianity, they hold tenaciously to Yoruba worldview and live under the fear of evil forces.

The contextual issue in the sermon is the reality of evil in human community. The sermon addresses the reality of evil from the perspective of the audience. Rather than rationalizing it, evil is concretized in the lives of the people. Being a rural community, the biggest felt need of the inhabitants of Aroromakinde is relief from the effects of evil. The people perceive evil as spiritual forces that impede their progress, afflict with diseases, destroy farms, and cause strange and mysterious death. They spend much effort in counteracting these powers, especially by the use of magic and medicine. While acknowledging the people's struggle to find solution through magic, amulets, charms, and medicine, the sermon underlines the limitations of these human-made help.

The people's existential struggle – human suffering and the reality of evil forces – is the hermeneutical key for the sermon. The biblical text is interpreted, albeit briefly, in light of this reality. By so doing, the sermon acknowledges the people's reality, which then provides the template for the proclamation of faith in God.

The sermon addresses two main theologies that evolve from the people's context. First, the sermon examines the theology of evil in relation to Yoruba worldview. Evil is explained as a concrete reality, consisting of the witches, wizards, *abiku*, and other mysterious spirit beings that impede human advancement and afflicts with sorrow and pain. The story of the afflicted young man demonstrates this reality.

The second theology in the sermon is the existence of God in Yoruba religious thought. Although this theology is not explicitly laid out in the sermon, the supremacy of Olodumare is proclaimed. In other words, while the sermon recognizes and acknowledges the existence of the spirit beings and the potency of their powers in human life, it affirms the Yoruba concept of Olodumare as the ultimate protector of humanity.

Yoruba linguistic features are utilized in many parts of the sermon. Taking a narrative approach, the sermon is launched with a biographical story, flavored with proverbs and sayings, and concretized with illustrations. This approach is amenable to Yoruba mode of communication and explanation of events. The stories and illustrations provide actual manifestations of evil that are graspable to the audience while the proverbs and sayings unpack the puzzles of the message. The intent of the technique is to set the people up with a story that resonates with their daily experience so as to lead them into finding Christian solution to the concrete problem of evil they often contend with.

Full Text of Sermon 2
"Behold The Lamb OF GOD"!
(based on Isaiah 53: 4-6 & John 1: 29-34)

The word Lamb runs through some of the hymns and scripture for today service. Prophet Isaiah sang the praise of an unnamed servant of God who bore the burden, grieves,

and sin of humanity while John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. In both passages, a Lamb is presented as a victim for cultic purposes – a necessary lamb that restores a people estranged from the Supreme Being. “Behold the Lamb,” John the Baptist publicly proclaimed when he saw Jesus approaching. He identified Jesus Christ as “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

The lamb is part of our economic commodities and plays crucial role in Yoruba cultic life. It produces wool for our clothing, skin for our bed, and meat, which is a valuable delicacy in many restaurants in the town. More importantly, lamb is frequently used for ritual and sacrifices in Yorubaland. I once witnessed how a traditional midwife ritually used a lamb to facilitate the child delivery of my maternal uncle’s wife. My uncle consulted a traditional midwife (*Agbebi*) for help a couple of years ago when his wife had a painful and protracted period of childbirth. The Agbebi requested for a pregnant lamb that was about to deliver. He performed some rituals, said some incantations, and tied the lamb to a *Porogun* tree² in his backyard. To the amazement of the family members present, my uncle’s wife safely delivered a nice looking baby girl just at the time the lamb delivered. Please don’t ask me how it happened because I don’t know. What I do know, however, is that my uncle and his wife considered the event real and effective insofar as the lamb saved both the baby and mother and transformed a potential disaster to joy for the family. Could this be the message John attempted to convey about Jesus – a burden bearer and life giver?

The Yoruba epic movie “ODUDUWA” makes John’s proclamation more understandable in our own context. I saw this movie sometime in the early 70s during my

² This tree is known for its longevity, medicinal, and ritual values in Yorubaland. It is sometimes used for rituals pertaining to restoration of life and boundary demarcations in farm settlement. Perhaps the Agbebi used *Porogun* tree as a means of magically cultivating its power in aid of the woman’s childbirth through the lamb.

secondary school days. The movie, reminiscent of Yoruba legend and religious traditions, was about the plight of the descendants of Oduduwa, the great ancestor and progenitor of the Yoruba. Those of us who are familiar with Yoruba myth and legend know that Oduduwa had seven sons, namely, Olowu, Alaketu, Oba, Orangun, Onisabẹ, Olipopo, and Oranyan. Each son had a kingdom after the demise of their father and each kingdom had council of chiefs and cult of elders who administered public affairs. Each kingdom also had its Orisa, ancestors, and taboo to regulate morality, private life, and interpersonal relations. They all recognized Oduduwa as their great and common ancestor and worshipped Olodumare as the Creator and Supreme Being.

The first scene of the movie showed Oduduwa with his seven sons at Ile-Ife, the homestead of the Yoruba. For years, the children enjoyed the good will of their father and the support of the people of Ile-Ife. But as Oduduwa advanced in age, he carved out kingdoms for his children so as to create more space for them and thereby expanded his own influence. This explains why the whole Yorubaland is today known as *Ile-Odu'a* and the Yoruba are referred to as *Omo Odu'a*.³ *Odu'a a gbe wa o!*⁴

Shortly before Oduduwa died, he summoned his sons and gave them his last wishes after which he prayed and dispersed them to different parts of Yoruba kingdom. If I remember correctly, Oduduwa's farewell prayer runs something like this:

*Nibikibi ti e ba lo
ti e si tẹdo si,
ti e ba n pa ofin mi mo,
ti e sin n sin Olodumare;
ti e n se otito si awon oriṣa ati si ara yin,*

³ Odu'a is a contraction form of Oduduwa.

⁴ May Oduduwa grant us favor! This ejaculatory prayer common among traditional worshippers in Yorubaland. It is a form of heartfelt deep feeling and desire usually expressed to ancestors and divinities in time of need.

*aboyun ile a ma bi wẹrẹ,
agan a ma t'owọ ala b'osun
eku a ma ke bi eku,
ẹyẹ a ma ke bi ẹyẹ,
omọ enia a si ma foun bi omọ enia.*⁵

The children bade farewell to their father after the parting rituals and journeyed to their respective kingdoms. The movie later showed how the sons established and administered their domain with fairness and justice. It also relayed features of many years of peace, progress, and prosperity they enjoyed.

From the look of things, it appeared that the parting wishes and prayers of Oduduwa were efficacious over his children. They were successful and famous. They lived in harmony with one another, the environment, and other cosmic powers. They planted and harvested, traded and made profit, married and had children, enjoyed plenty of rain and sunshine. Indeed, Orisa blessed their land as Oduduwa wished. Everything worked accordingly to their well-being. True to the legendary prayers of Oduduwa, *eku n ke bi eku, ẹyẹ nke bi ẹyẹ, aboyun n bi wẹrẹ, agan n t'owọ ala b'osun. Igba ile o fọ, beni awo ile o si fa ya.*⁶

But the elders usually say, *bo ba n dara to si n san ni, ka sọra ka si ma fura. Papa o fura o jona, Aja o fura Aja jin. A i fura Akukọ lo gbe rẹ se d'onjẹ Kọlọkọlọ.*⁷ For a long time the children of Oduduwa reveled in their success and fame until things began to fall apart little by little. In time, the land witnessed severe famine as a result of prolonged drought. Hunger and starvation hit villages and towns, sparing no one. The people that were once

⁵ This is a covenantal prayer and blessings. Here Oduduwa affirmed that communal security, peace, prosperity, and prominence are intrinsic consequences of his sons' fidelity to covenant relationship. A similar prayer is found in Deut. 28.

⁶ This is a prayer as well as a saying which simply means that everything thing goes orderly in the community. It indicates that the peace and prosperity Oduduwa wished for his children came to fruition.

⁷ This is a warning usually given to people to be careful especially at the time of peace and prosperity. The Yoruba believe that unless one is cautious hideous evil sometimes creeps into one's life or community at an unsuspected time.

plumb and robust became emaciated. The whole land became restive as shadow of death enveloped the people. Mourners grieved as they signaled the death of the high and low, the sick and the whole, the young and the old. Leaves withered, flowers faded, rivers shrunk. People could only whisper to one another in such a glooming situation for fear of their voice been heard by the spirit of death that seemed to lurk in darkness. Terrible disaster fell on Odu'a land and children! Wailing drove away laughter, joy ceased, and sorrow reigned. Impregnable darkness descended on the land, horror and anguish engulfed the mind, and the whole kingdom of Odu'a was ghost ridden.

With great pain, worry, and trepidation, the council of elders consulted Orunmila, the omniscient god of the Yoruba. The land was sick, Orunmila pronounced, because the people were in contempt of the pillars of their existence. They had debased the moral values of the ancestors and as the sayings of the elders goes, *eni ba t 'oka ni'ru a ri'ja oka, eni ba bu Sango a ri'ja obakoso, nitori a ki bu aara ko ma san.*⁸ Orunmila revealed that the gods of the land were angry because the people have broken taboo. The ancestors were in great distress of the incursion of insincerity and deceit in the kingdom. The descendants of Odu'a had deviated from the ancient path, oppressed the weak, and despised the righteous. Ifa predicted more calamity saying: Esu and Sonpona, the two dreaded agents of destruction, would continue to pour venom on the people unless they appease the gods and atone for their transgression. The only solution, the oracle pronounced, was a lamb sacrifice.

⁸ Whoever tramples on the cobra will face the wrath of the cobra, whoever curses Sango will face the wrath of Sango, just as thunder cannot but roar whenever it is conjured. These three sayings imply that there are consequences for every human action. The sayings are used here to suggest that the unpleasant turn of events in Odu'a kingdom was as a result of the people's infidelity to the gods and their deceitful human relationship.

At Orunmila's behest, the people provided a lamb to appease the gods. *Ifa o gb'owo be ni ko gba'so. Aguntan bolojọ ni'fa mu.*⁹ Orunmila performed the required rituals and slaughtered the lamb at the village shrine. Soon afterward, there was a shower of rain, which signifies the acceptance of the sacrifice. This was the high point of the movie – a time when the lamb stood in place of the people and attracted divine blessing to the land.

A lamb! A lamb! An innocent lamb! As I read and listen to Isaiah's message of the suffering servant and John the Baptist's witness about Jesus as God's lamb, I cannot but wonder about the significance of the lamb in this movie. Although the scriptwriter of this movie was not particularly portraying Christian theology of atonement, the offering of the lamb, much like the crucifixion of Christ, gave such implication. The lamb restored normalcy to Odu's land; its death gave life and vitality to the afflicted people. What a great sight to behold thereafter!

The death of the lamb surprisingly transformed the kingdom and the people. With torrential rain and bright sunshine, parched lands sprung to life. Human beings, plants, and animals received life. The rivers resumed their normal course; birds soared high, and sang melodiously. Children became healthy, running round the village square to the delight of their parents. The young women (virgin) burst out in their full figure, shining in soft and succulent skin, and flaunting their beauty to the admiration of prospective suitors. Fully content, the older women sang delightfully as they nursed suckling children or prepared family meals. The men moved swiftly to the farm, ploughing and planting. The kitchen resumed normal business and sweet aroma filled the air. The cocks crowed, the goats bleated, and the frogs combined with the crickets to produce melodious orchestral music at night. The

⁹ This is traditional cultic saying. It means Ifa demands neither money nor cloth but only a mature lamb.

town came alive one more time! The village and town squares, once deserted, brightened up as they hosted dance competition, and Ayo contests, local politics, and other community activities.¹⁰ Once again there was plenty to eat, plenty to drink, and plenty to offer to passers-by, all at the expense of the lamb. The people lived happily ever after because an innocent lamb paid the costly price.

This movie is evergreen in my memory, especially the substitutionary role of the lamb. It reminds me of the popular Tele festival.¹¹ As we all know, this a festivity that has immense religious value for this community. It provides an outlet for the entire community to rid itself of all defilement and seek divine blessing and protection. Just as the passing of the heavily burden Tele man symbolizes the death of old life and the birth of the new, the lamb's life turned the tide in Odu'a people's community. Not only did the lamb atone for the misdeeds of the people, it also bore their grief, pain, and sorrow. It absorbed the anger of the gods and turned the smiling face of the ancestors to the delinquent people. The lamb straddled the visible and the invisible worlds and reconciled both to each other.

Like the sacrificial lamb in this epic movie, John the Baptist penetratingly gazed at Jesus and saw what others did not see. He saw a suffering lamb! Like Isaiah vividly described, John saw a despised, rejected, and crucified lamb on a divine mission to save the sick, lost, and dying world (Isa. 53: 4-9). "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" John proclaimed (John 1:29).

What is your understanding of Jesus? For some people, Jesus is a good man whose teaching and selfless lifestyle are compelling and worthy of emulation. Some others perceive him as a royalty, a man dressed in royal purple and enthroned in gold plated throne. It is not

¹⁰ Ayo is a traditional Yoruba game. For more information, see Idowu, *Olodumare*, 34.

¹¹ Tele is an important religious festival of purification in Ile-Ife.

impossible for some to see him as *Are-onakakanfo*¹² - a great warrior and commander of undefeated army. Certainly, Jesus is much more than a good fellow, or royalty, or an army general. He is not just a great teacher, compassionate healer, loving friend, and radical reformer. Jesus is a bruised Lamb through whom the power of sin is destroyed, the fear of death is defeated, and grace is obtained for humanity. A poem by my twelve-year old girl expresses it aptly.

Jesus is the oppressed and afflicted Lamb!
born in filth and obscurity,
lowly and covered with rag,
possessing no form or majesty;
Yet, a delightful Lamb of God.

God's love the prophets witnessed
His birth angels announce,
His glory shepherds adore,
His mission stars reveal,
Hallelujah to the Lamb of God!

An innocent lamb and suffering servant,
a voice in the wilderness witnessed;
Rejected by kings and queens,
Despised by the wise and noble;
But embraced by common folks and criminals.

The Lamb, Jesus the Christ made known,
In human form he appeared,
For us all God sent him,
To touch life and redeem sinners
To die that we may live,

"Behold the Lamb of God" I also exclaimed
My burden he came to bear,
My sorrow and agony upon him lay,
My way back home he came to lead,
For my sin he came to die.

Ye that pass by wait and behold,

¹² *Are-onakakanfo* is the title of the generalissimo, the highest military officer of the Yoruba traditional Army.

On the cross the lamb groaning,
With dripping blood he pleads,
“Forgive them oh, forgive,” he prays,
The immortal One died for you.

The immortal One died for you, for me, for all! That is what I see on the rugged cross – an afflicted, disfigured, and crucified lamb for the abominations of the world! Think about the life of Jesus for a moment. Think about how friends betrayed him; how leaders and folks accused him; how powers and authority put him to death; and how people in uniform ridiculed him. Still he loves, pleads, and prays for them. When you think of these and survey the old rugged cross where sorrow and blood flow, you cannot but realize why John witnessed to Jesus as the suffering Lamb of God. You cannot but proclaim with faith and convictions like Isaiah and John that much more than the lamb that reversed the circumstances of Odu’s descendants, Jesus Christ is truly the one and only sacrificial Lamb of God. He is God’s love poured out for humanity; the one who dies of broken heart so that we all may have immortality and abundant life. All praise and thanks to the precious Lamb of God!

Analysis of Sermon 2: A Sermon on Atonement Theology

Focus Statement

Much more than the sacrificial lamb that atones for the sin in primal religion, Jesus Christ is the ultimate lamb that reconciles the world to God and expresses the fullness of God’s love to humanity.

Function Statement

The function of this sermon is to present Jesus Christ as the ultimate sacrificial lamb for the atonement of human sin.

Context and Contextualization

This Christological sermon is designed for a Good Friday service and intended for Methodist Church Nigeria Ile-Ife. As indicated in the second chapter of this project, Ile-Ife is the cradle and religious home of the Yoruba. The town is semi-urban and bears the features of both traditional lifestyle and modernity. The town is known for its numerous traditional religious festival and ritual practices. Although most Ife people profess Christianity or Islam, they also practice traditional religion on the side.

The Good Friday service provides the immediate context for this sermon. It allows for the proclamation of Christian theology of atonement. Knowing fully well that the word atonement is neither present nor familiar to the audience, the sermon focuses on the importance of sacrifice in religion. For them, as for the Yoruba generally, sacrifice represents human way of connecting the spiritual world and a means of soliciting the help and blessing of the deity. Although the ideas of sacrifice and lamb metaphor are scriptural, they are equally rooted in Yoruba religious worldview. Both are cultural motifs the audience could easily identify with and thus, provide relevant hermeneutical points of contact for the presentation of Johannine Christology in Yoruba context. The sermon is attentive to the experiential grounds of Yoruba beliefs in that the people's traditional understanding of sacrifice shapes the proclamation of Jesus as the perfect and ultimate sacrifice for the remission of sin. This helps to build an image that resonates with Yoruba belief system.

Several elements of Yoruba traditions and culture are used in the design and development of the sermon. One of the elements is metaphor. The sermon follows John the Baptist witness in John 1:29 by centering on a lamb metaphor. It emphasizes the crucial role of the lamb in Yoruba primal religion being one of the animals commonly used for sacrifice.

Not only does this resonate with John's witness, it also roots the message in context as it relates to the religious thought of the Yoruba. The Yoruba epic movie sets up and places the sermon in context while the proverbs, sayings, and Yoruba legend of Oduduwa demonstrate and illuminate the central metaphor. Since the Yoruba speak poetically, the sermon concludes with a poem on Jesus as a suffering servant and Lamb of God.

Full Text of Sermon 3
Ruptured Rhythm of Life
(based on Luke 12: 13-21)

A couple of years ago, at the height of Military dictatorship, His Eminence Sunday Mbang¹³ said that any nation or people that fail to attend to the needs of its Youth cannot but atrophy. This profound statement is a reality in our community today. Some months ago a dare devil gang of armed robbers raided our apartment, leaving a trail of sorrow, pain, and affliction behind. This is not peculiar but a daily occurrence in the community. Some of us probably heard the painful story of an elderly woman who was visited by armed robbers not too long ago. This woman had four grand kids with her on this fateful night. According to the story, the armed robbers drowned the children in a deep well simply because the innocent woman had nothing valuable they could take. The most painful of it all is that most of these armed bandits are young people.

A young man of about 21 years whom I'll refer to as Felix strolled into my office the other day looking for somebody to talk. Felix's desire was for a priest to absolve him of his sins and assure him of God's forgiveness. Hearing this, I took time off my busy schedule to listen to his story. Felix came from a family of four children. His parents were well off and

¹³ His Eminence Sunday Mbang is the Prelate of Methodist Church Nigeria. He was the President and spokesperson of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) when he made this statement.

his father had a good job. However, fate struck the home as a hit and run drunk driver killed the father. The sudden death of the man brought the family into a disaster. Felix's mother tried her best to fend for the children but she suddenly became ill out of exhaustion and died. Thus, the children became orphans very early in their lives. In time, however, they dropped out of school for lack of funds and things became unbearable for them. Extended family turned them away; family-friends abandoned them.

Being the eldest of the four and determined to help his siblings, Felix turned to friends who introduced him to gang, armed robbery, and drug pushing. Before long, Felix became a gang leader, raided houses, killed and maimed people. Truly, Felix was able to provide for the basic needs of his sibling. One of them graduated from the Polytechnic, one finished secondary school, while the only girl of the four turned to prostitution to survive. It is sad to note that the girl recently died of Aids. Her death troubled Felix. He thought of the atrocities he had committed, the people he had killed, and the dreams he had shattered in an attempt to survive. He thought of himself better dead than living because he could not bear the sense of loss. Felix initially thought of committing suicide but for some reasons turned to God for help; he looked for a priest who could lead him to repentance and forgiveness. Felix cried out for divine forgiveness, assurance, and peace. Today, Felix is free, happy, and regenerated.

This is just one case out of many. There are many Felix out there who have taken to gangs and other atrocious acts because they have had their backs against the wall. While Felix is fortunate to have a second chance, many do not. Many are languishing in jail, some have been killed, and drugs have ruined some others. True to Mbang's statement, disaster is inevitable when a nation fails to look after its Youth.

In the midst of this social malaise, I have had people ask me on a number of occasions: why do we fast, pray, and humble ourselves but God doesn't seem to notice? Where have we failed or fallen? Why are the heavens inattentive to our plight? What offense have we committed to warrant this social evil? Each time I ask myself these same questions I usually come to a conclusion: we have forsaken our core values. It is not God's fault but ours. We have hewed empty cistern for ourselves. And a society that forsakes its foundation cannot but collapse just as a river dries up if it is disconnected from its source. We certainly have forsaken our time-tested values and have invented new lifestyles that are contrary to our DNA.

It has been observed repeatedly that the Yoruba, much like other Africans, are communal people. Community is the foundation of our culture. It permeates every facet of our life and constitutes the rhythm of our existence. Our history and traditions show that we are a people who live together in a unified community, and share all things in common. I grew up seeing people expressing more concern for the survival of the whole community than of the individuals. Our underlying ethos as a people is communitarian and collective responsibilities. It is an ethos that regards nothing too significant to sacrifice for the well being of neighbors and strangers. Ours used to be a society characterized by communion, a society where everything is held in common like the early Apostles (cf. Acts. 4: 32-34). What affects one affects all, the survival of one is the survival of all; the disgrace of one person is the disgrace of the entire community. This is what lies behind the Yoruba saying: *ajeje owo Kan 'o gb' eru d'ori* (a single finger is incapable of lifting up a load). What matters most in Yoruba community, as we all know, is the sacredness of the community and communal life. This is why the Anglican Bishop of Ijebu, Akin Omoyajowo states: no one goes to bed

hungry in traditional Yoruba society. Indeed, we strive and survive within the community for without it we are non-beings like a roving bird without a nest.

Regrettably, however, this mode of existence is presently under attack by another lifestyle. A new cistern we hewed for ourselves is endangering our existence as a people. Some of us will agree that the Yoruba race faces immense threat of individualism and apathy – an approach to life that is capable of splintering us and robbing us of our status and prestige in this entity called Nigeria. Our peace and stability are fast yielding to chaos, insecurity, and uncertainty. Without intentionally sounding like a prophet of doom, one cannot but observe that our society is falling apart because we are far adrift from the values that identify us as a people. Perhaps this is partly why we have people like Felix terrorizing us.

It is becoming fashionable, nowadays, for many of us to think about ourselves before others. Our political watchers indicate that we are currently caught in the spirit of individualism, nepotism, and division. Self-centered phrases like my life, my money, my house, my car, are fast becoming daily expressions among us. We are reversing the invaluable African aphorism from “I am because we are” to we are because I am. Ours is an age that embraces the strange and foreign saying: *won n ja n le keji se kan e* (what concerns you about the quarrel in the neighbor compound). We are sadly neglecting our concern for the wellbeing of others simply because we consider the social ethic of collective responsibility unfit for the modern age. It is, therefore, no surprise that there are strife, killing, envy, jealousy, greed, inordinate desire for possession, and subversion among us. We have opened the floodgate of destruction for ourselves and our boat as a people is about to capsize. The rhythm of our life is at the verge of rupture.

The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12: 13-21 speaks to this disturbing situation. In this parable, Jesus uses an occasion of dispute over family properties to paint a picture of human greed and insatiable desire for possession. The land of a man produced abundantly, Jesus says. Overwhelmed with the mass produce, the man did what many of us would do. He pulled down his little barn, built a bigger one, stored all his possessions, and subsequently proceeded on retirement to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

No doubt some of us would praise the man's business-like action. After all we do pray for success in our endeavors. Or isn't it the prayer of every reasonable person to retire beneficially after labor? The man labors and reaps high dividend! His land produced huge harvest than his little barn could contain and he takes diligent and cautious steps in securing his massive wealth. It appears that the man demonstrates clear vision and management acumen in order to ensure blissful retirement. Why, then, shouldn't we praise him?

It appears we are missing something very vital if we look at the story carefully. Do we notice that rather than praising the man, Jesus actually upbraided and condemned him to instant death? Why? This is a question one cannot answer with certitude. We can only imagine that Jesus sentenced him for his failure to acknowledge God, the source of all blessings. Experiences often show that success does not usually depend upon hard work, good and desirable as this may be. As the saying goes, victory is neither for the mighty nor the race for the swift. Success and progress rest squarely on God the creator and sustainer of life. "Unless the Lord build the house," says the psalmist "those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127: 1). Could this be why Jesus condemned him?

Instead of praising God the source of all blessings the man indulged in self-praise and became self-absorbed. Hear what he said.

What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store my crops?*I* will do this: *I* will pull down my barns and build a larger ones, and there *I* will store all my grain and my goods. And *I* will say to my soul, Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry (vv 17-19 italics added for emphasis).

Do you hear the word I, I, I, echoing again and again? This is a man of high-sounding “I”, a self-preoccupied person much like many of our leaders today. He is much like Abacha of our time. For this Jesus charges him: You fool, who will inherit this massive wealth when your soul is taken way tonight? But that shouldn’t be a major problem, some of us might protest! Yes, what is the big deal about that? After all, the man’s wife and kids would happily take over the estate after his demise. While the issue of inheritance may not be a big deal under normal circumstances, it happens to be in this story. Where are beneficiaries in this narrative?

This question provides a curious lens for us to examine the narrative in light of our current situation. One thing that strikes me odd about the story is the personality of this rich man. Who is he? Who are is family? How does he understand himself in relation to his community? What are the implications of his action in a society founded on communal and relational mode of being?

For one, Jesus did not bother to mention his name. He was an anonymous and self-indulgent character. He is presented to us without a wife or kids. He is a lone ranger with no name and no family. Could it possibly be that Jesus considers the man’s action more consequential than his name and family? Maybe! But in a society where community, communal mode of being, and social relationship constitute part of a person’s personality, this story tends to show a person that is far removed from his social reality. The man assumes the character of a lonely, greedy, and self-absorbed person. He depicts someone who is more concerned with personal security and individual happiness than the well being of his

community. Such a person engages in trivial pursuit and forgets that human life is not enriched by mere accumulation of wealth and profiteering but by sharing and communion with other people.

This parable reminds me of a tale by moonlight that my grandmother once told me. It was the story of Awade. Awade was a small but prosperous ancient Yoruba town that recognized and valued every member of the community. The town was reputable for its pursuit of community, solidarity, equity, and equality. Its political life thrived on equal participation and collective responsibility. Even though the monarch was the leader and spokesperson for the town, every member – young and old, poor and rich, able and disabled, man and woman – also contributed to the governance of the town.

In time, Awade experienced a thick cloud – a cloud that almost overshadowed its silver lining. The peace, tranquility, and progress that characterized the town paved way to chaos and calamity. The people fasted and prayed to no avail. They mourned and placated the gods but the situation persisted. Finally they consulted the oracle and Ifa revealed that Afemi, their reigning monarch was the cause of the affliction. Ifa noted that the gods were angry because Afemi had deviated from ancient tradition by refusing to validate and value every member of the community. Rather than ruling by collective decision and consultation, Ifa revealed that Afemi was self-preoccupied and spreading the contagious spirit of *a fe mi! a fe mi!! a fe mi!!!* (I! I!! I!!!). Consequently, Ifa warned that Awade would not recover its lost peace until the people replaced Afemi with another monarch that will uphold the people's will and cultural values. In keeping with the warning of the oracle, the elders dethroned Afemi and put his son Afeniyan Afolun in his stead. Afeniyan ruled by collective will and

his reign, often remembered by the aphorism: *a f' Olorun, a f' eniyan; a f' eniyan a fe mi* (it is God with the people and I), restored peace and progress to Awade.

Our society, like Awade, is facing tremendous chaos simply because we have deviated from the path of our ancestors. We've refused to provide for the Felix at our doorsteps. Our ancestors loved people but we love wealth. Our ancestors embraced one another but we embrace self. Our ancestors thought of others before self, we are thinking of self before others. Our forebears attended to the Felix in their community but we are attending to trivial properties and titles. Contrary to our communal mode of existence, many of us, like Afemi and the rich fool, are self-preoccupied. We've turned a blind eye and deaf ears to the plights and cries of our own Felix hence they are inflicting pain and sorrow on us. We spend much time accumulating wealth and expanding our barns. It is no secret that the wealth of this land is in the hands of few people who stash them away in foreign banks, live in cozy houses, dine from gold plated wares, and lay on beds of ivory both at home and overseas. More regrettably, these questionable wealthy fellow countrymen and women are callously indifferent to the pain, suffering, and humiliation of the numerous Felix in society. They tend to forget that complacency to the plight of Felix turned him into criminal. This is what I consider a threat to our life. This is my story! This is my song! *Omo Odu'a e o fura!* (Odu'a descendants be mindful!).

In times like this one cannot but remember the thought provoking Yoruba poet, Olanrewaju Adepoju. In his *Ewi* (poetry), *Yoruba Ronu*, Adepoju called our attention to the woes and calamities that are ravaging the land as a result of our departure from our traditional values of community and communal solidarity. He admonished us to retrace our

steps so as to avert the denigration and disintegration of the Yoruba as a people. But have we listened to the call?

I personally don't think so! I don't think so because the realities of the moment point to the fact that many years after the outcry of *Yoruba Ronu*, it is business as usual. We are preoccupied with how much of the community wealth we can divert to personal purse. We are apathetic to the crisis in society. We regard Adepoju's call mere babbling and Felix's cry inconsequential noise. We pretend as if all is well while poverty deepens, armed- robbery and burglary increases, hatred and ritual killings abound, joblessness, insecurity, and uncertainty escalate. No wonder the land is afflicted. No wonder many people are working aimlessly about. No wonder ethnic clashes multiply. Shall we because of what to eat and what to drink abandon the cord that binds us together? When a people sever their binding cord, sense of peoplehood, relationship, and unity they become strangers to one another and invite free reign of hatred and apathy. *Yoruba e ronnu!* (think Yoruba children!)

But what goes around also comes around! Our untraditional and asocial actions are haunting us seriously. They are unsettling the social landscape and challenging our rhythm of life. The question we need to ask ourselves at this time is not whether but when our soul as a people shall be required of us like the rich fool. How much longer shall the land continue to withhold the verdict against us? *Omo Yoruba ronnu!*

But there is still hope for us – a hope that is anchored on the grace of God. God is gracious! God is always luring us into greater good. Perhaps it is this divine graciousness that still keeps our society from being utterly consumed like the narcissistic rich fool. The graciousness is equally urging us even now as a people to recover our soul and work towards the transformation of our land like the people of Awade. It is not too late for us to repent of

the spirit of Afemi, which permeates every facet of our lives and embrace the spirit of Afeniyen Afolorun. For if I may adapt Jesus' wise saying, what shall it profit a person who possesses the whole world but remains unprofitable to his/her community? *Omo Odu'a ejẹ ka ronnu!*

Analysis of Sermon 3: A Sermon on Community and Relational Existence

Focus Statement

The continuing existence and progress of a people is contingent upon how well they abide by the core values of their society. So it is for the Yoruba as our flourishing depends largely upon our relational mode of being with one another and with God.

Function Statement

To enable the hearers to perceive how uncritical embrace of foreign lifestyle can sometimes unsettle a people's social landscape, open the floodgates of chaos and social malaise, and obstruct free flow of human relationship and well-being.

Context and Contextualization

The sermon is designed for Christian Social Responsibility Sunday, which also coincided with the anniversary of *Egbe Omo Odu'a* (The Society of Odu'a Descendants). It aims at revitalizing Yoruba cultural ethos and mode of being. As indicated earlier in chapter two, *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* is a sociocultural organization that promotes the cultural values, social system, and political interest of Yoruba race. I once participated in the activities of the Society along with my Bishop. Both the Christian social responsibility service and the anniversary of *Egbe Omo Odu'a* raise the crucial issues of community and communal relationship for the audience.

Taking these issues into consideration, the sermon addresses community and relationality. It analyzes the prevailing social malaise in Yoruba society and attributes the problem to the gradual disappearance of community among the Yorubaland. To talk about community or communal mode of being is to touch the nerve center of Yoruba cultural ethos as indicated earlier in chapter two. In light of the gradual erosion of this ethos and subtle incursion of individualism and its attendant effect in Yorubaland, the sermon advocates for the reclaim of Yoruba communal existence. Although the sermon may appear generic, it speaks directly to the audience – Odu’a society – whose primary objective is to promote community and Yoruba culture.

The biblical text is carefully analyzed through the lens of Yoruba cultural ethos. In this regards, communal living provides a critique of both the biblical text and current context of the audience.

The sermon espouses Yoruba thought of the human person as a social and relational being.¹⁴ It argues that the human person is a being in relation rather than isolated individual. As indicated earlier in chapter two, the Yoruba believe that it is in relationality and community that a person actualizes his/her full essence of being. While individual traits are not completely obliterated, one’s personality is contingent upon one’s role in the community. The sermon is in this regard a proclamation of community, communality, and relational theologies.

The sermon draws on multiple delivery techniques. It begins with a live story of Felix, which exemplifies the experience of many young people in contemporary Yoruba society. The story is meant to catch the attention of the audience as well as to raise issues that

¹⁴ See Awolalu, “The African Traditional View of Man,” 112-13.

affect some of them. The curious use of the parable of the rich fool helps to flesh out the theme of the message while the story of Felix combined with Awade's tale, Lanrewaju Adepoju's *Ewi* and several Yoruba proverbs and sayings enrich the texture and place the message in proper context.

Full Text of Sermon 4
The Clan of Jesus
(based on Acts 4: 32-37)

This morning, as we celebrate the Worldwide Communion Sunday, I'll like to call our attention to something very crucial – something that has engaged my thoughts over the years. It is something pertaining to who we are, the purpose of our being, and God's expectation of us. I want us to look at our community, the Church. A moment ago in keeping with the traditions of our ancestors in faith we recited the Nicene Creed and openly confessed that we believe in "One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church." This was the conviction and affirmation of our faithful mothers and fathers in faith. I supposed our confession is rooted in the deep and defiant conviction of these holy and revered ancestors too! We need to know that this confession is central to the nature of the church and has immense ramifications for its unity and continued existence. It is pertinent, in this regard, to occasionally, if not always, remind ourselves of who we are.

I remember sometimes in 1986 during my seminary days at Immanuel College of Theology Ibadan, a discussion ensued between my circle of friends, which centered on the nature and identity of the church. It was an honest and genuine effort or quest to understand and articulate as clearly as possible a response to the question: who are we? Out of that discussion emerged a clearly articulated theological perspective that "we are a people whose

mission is to preach Jesus Christ and promote community.” In the ‘magic’ of that moment of clarity (bear in mind here the picture of young and impressionable seminarians) it seems to us that we (my friends and I) had an epiphany. The feeling was like that of a person who stumbles on a buried treasure in a dungeon. It was an indescribable euphoria – but a satisfying and overwhelming feeling nonetheless. We thought we’ve grasped the identity, purpose, past, present, and future of the church so far as we could imagine at that moment. With hindsight, however, I know better that although we were on the right path then, we only saw, as it were, vaguely through a mirror, the nature of the church. We knew just very little about this holy entity whose full essence cannot be expressed by a single image or metaphor. We need as many images and metaphors as we could imagine in order for us to have a reasonable knowledge of this divinely instituted estate. This is a quest I set for myself, a quest I now invite you to probe this morning.

Christians over the ages have attempted this quest. They have used several metaphor and images to speak about or describe the church. Some of them are rooted in the scripture while others are culturally based. The most popular and common ones include the body of Christ, the light of the world, Assembly of God’s people, Assembly of the faithful, Community of faith, family of God, and the beloved community. Others include the called out people, the chosen people, people of the way, the vineyard, the saints, etc. Each of these images and metaphors is quite revealing, illustrative, informative, and educative. They collectively speak about the nature and mission of the church. Thus I want to present another metaphor – a metaphor I have come to appreciate because of it is rootedness in our culture and resonance with our identity. It is the clan metaphor.

Some of us perhaps know what clan means. We use it regularly, don't we? We use it especially when talking about someone's root and identity. Clan is a social group comprising of numbers of households, which claim descent from common ancestors, bear common surname, and acknowledge a paramount chief or monarch who bears this name as distinctive title. People of a clan generally possess common territory and a totem as symbol of identification. Although clan members consist of people of common blood descent, it sometimes includes adopted foreigners as well as bondsmen and women. In this case, the foreigners and bonds people usually adopt the tradition, ancestry, totem, and taboos of their surrogate clan.

Based on this broad definition, the Yoruba as a people are a clan. We acknowledge the legendary Oduduwa as our common ancestor hence our appellation *Omo Odu'a*. *Odu'a a gbe wa o!* (May Odu'a favor us!). Except for some unfortunate political expediency, some, if not most Yoruba, accept Oni of Ife as the paramount monarch and Ile-Ife as Yoruba homestead. An extended family, tribe, or offspring could also be classified as a clan. The features of a clan thus include blood relationship, common descent, common ancestor, common totem, and common surname. Some clans also have specific physical features like facial marks or body tattoos. In the days of intermittent war and inter-tribal conflict in the old Yoruba kingdom facial mark was one of the means of identifying the clans of prisoners of wars. The Ijebu are for instance known by *pele*, while the Ogbomoso bear *gombo* facial mark.

In our own society – among the Yoruba, clan is what we call *Idile*. This is an extended family that comprises people of patrilineal descent. It is, however, regrettable nowadays that some of us do not even have the slightest idea of how some people are related

to us. Many people like me are unaware of our family history and we are thereby missing an important part of our identity. But, more often than not, we accept our relatives as soon as we identify them. As the saying goes, “blood is thicker than water”.

Clan members are bonded together in love and affection. As Ebenezer Obey, the popular Yoruba Juju musician expresses, friends could be forgotten but family is seldom abandoned. Clan members may quarrel and disagree they are nonetheless hospitable to all and ensure the security of all. They jealously guard the clan’s symbol of identity (totem) and keep its taboos. For the most part in our tradition, actions of clan members are motivated by collective responsibility and concern for the well-being of everybody. Where individual interest clashes with clan interest, the later often overrides. Could we then apply this social image to the church? Can the church be called the clan of Christ?

Acts 4: 32-34 describes the early church as people of “one heart and soul.”

Now the whole group of those who believed were of *one heart and soul*, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was no needy person among them...(vv 32 &34 italics added for emphasis).

Significant to the writer of Acts is that the early church was of “one heart and soul”. They lived as one loving family and catered to the need of everyone. Some have described this way of life as a prototype of communism and socialism. But be that as it may, what interest me most in this passage is the clause “believers were of one heart and soul.” This clause speaks volumes. For one, one heart and one soul implies more than shared belief, which bonded the early church in solidarity. It presupposes a significant commitment to others and an appreciable level of intimate relationship that blurs the boundaries of personal right and private property. It is like a blood bond between soulmates or clan members. For Luke, the

supposed writer of Acts of the Apostle, the church is a clan – one loving family. It is one extended family that loves and accepts one another unconditionally – not necessarily a perfect family but an enduring fellowship of kindred mind.

Oops! What a faulty analogy we might say! After all the church does not qualify as a clan going by sociological definition since members are not necessarily blood relations. Except in cases of family church, which are rare to come across in our area, church folks come from diverse family, culture, and background. In our own local church, for instance, we have the Ijebu *Omọ alare*, Ijesa *Omọ Obokun*, Oyo *mesi ogo*, Ibadan *Omọ aje'gbin yo*, Egba *Omọ Lisabi*, Ondo *egin*, Eko *akete*, and Ekiti *parapo*.¹⁵ We also have some Igbos and other nationals among us. But buried under this mosaic appearance is our unity – a unity of one heart and one soul. Though we are many and diverse, we are one. Not only are we one in this local church, we are also members of the clan of Jesus all over the world because we are rooted in one foundation and possess common identity. Regardless of differences in language and tongue we are one in brotherhood and sisterhood. As the saying goes in Ogboni cult: *Omọ iya dun, gbogbo wa la jọ mu*.¹⁶ Apostle Paul claims that regardless of differences in culture and background, all those who profess faith in Christ are one clan. They have one God; they belong to one great ancestor, Jesus Christ; and they possess one spirit (Eph. 4: 4-6). Much more than the *Omọ Iya* of the Ogboni these elements constitute the foundation, identity, and unity of the Christian clan. They transform us into the clan of Christ.

¹⁵ The italicized words are appellations attached to each Yoruba subgroups.

¹⁶ This saying literally means: the mother's breast is delicious, we have all sucked it. It is a call and response coded saying (*ohun*) that signifies the solidarity and fraternity of the Ogboni cult. They usually demonstrate this sense of solidarity by kissing the breast of the cult's sacred object, *Edan* – a female brass figure. For more information on this saying and the Ogboni Fraternity see Peter Morton-Williams, "The Yoruba Ogboni Cult in Oyo," *Africa* 30, no. 3 (1960): 362-74.

While we are rooted and grounded in our social clan through blood relation, our faith and baptism are the gateway into Jesus' clan. I remember when my son was baptized. Holding the baby up after the baptismal rite, the pastor made a sign of the cross on his forehead and said: we welcome you into the family of faith and pray that you will feel welcomed and remain faithful to God in your journey of faith. This ritual gives me a deep impression of the church as a clan – a clan that welcomes whosoever will into community. It enables me to see the church as an open and affirming clan of Jesus. We become bonafide members of this clan and have access to all its privileges and responsibilities the very day we consciously profess Christ and are baptized (John 1:12). From that very day on Jesus Christ our greatest ancestor, assumes the responsibility of watching over us and representing our interest before the Supreme Being. It doesn't matter where we come from or what our background is – east or west, north or south – as long as we confess faith in Jesus, the foundation and ultimate ancestor of the church, we are one clan for we all derive from one heart and one soul. We have God as our father, Jesus our ancestor, and the spirit for our guidance. Drawn from many nations, languages, and cultures, we belong to one living mosaic clan of Jesus.

If truly we are members of the same clan – the clan of Jesus, how ought we to live and relate to one another? Let us again examine the written biography of our ancestors in faith i.e. the early church.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was no needy person among them...(Vv 32 &34).

Because these men and women of faith possessed one heart and soul, they had common possession and jointly attended to the needs of all. All through Acts of the Apostle, we could

see glimpses of their inner lifestyle. Even though they radically disagreed on principles of faith, they loved and cared. They had common table fellowship. They were open to each other and hospitable to strangers. They prayed for one another, stood by one another, and shared each other's burden. In my social clan, as it is in many of us, no one is left to himself/herself in times of need even when we disagree on a number of issues. This is why our elders say *okun omo iya yi*.¹⁷ That is the beauty of a clan – to love even when we disagree.

This is what we are supposed to be! But is that what we truly are? Are we of one heart and soul? Do we see ourselves as members of a single clan? Is love genuine amongst us? Do we care for each other? Are we hospitable to the strangers within our territory? Are we, indeed, prepared to lay down our personal possessions for the use of all? The early church knew what it means to be a clan as they stood and fell together when it was necessary. They drew strength and courage from this unity, which enabled them to finish their course in faith. How much sacrifice are we prepared to make for the sake of our brothers and sisters in faith? How far can we go for each other? Can we lean on one another as we often do our biological clan members?

It is a noticeable phenomenon among Christians today to address each other as brothers and sisters. This is a remarkable step toward the realization of our true identity. It is a movement toward actualizing, in concrete terms, what it means to be a clan of the holy and revered ancestor, Jesus Christ. But we need to move beyond mere rhetoric into the realm of practice and actuality. We need to accept ourselves as people of one heart and soul. We need

¹⁷ Literally, the saying means maternal tie is tough. It means that come what may, people of the same maternal relation are bonded together. In Yorubaland, it is easy for children of the same father to disagree and disown one another than children of the same mother.

to attend to the needy and be ready to sacrifice our time and treasure for the well-being of the clan. Yes, our great ancestor, Jesus Christ, beckons us to love each other as he did and still does regardless of our disagreement; welcome each other regardless of our differences; celebrate each other regardless of our culture and nationality. It is in doing this that we truly become the clan of Christ.

Yes, we could truly become a clan of Jesus! We can do this when we know that clan solidarity evinces more than shared beliefs. To share one heart and soul demands intimacy and commitment that eliminates all differences and boundaries. This understanding presents us a challenge as well as opportunity. It demands unconditional love of the unlovable, wholehearted acceptance of the indifferent, and total embrace of strangers. It also enables us to see and accept one another as precious relatives and soulmates. Therefore, as we gather at the Lord's Table to share the holy meal on this Worldwide Communion Sunday, let's uphold each other as brothers and sisters of one clan. Let us approach the table with the full awareness that though we are many and diverse, we are one people of one spirit, one great ancestor, and belong to one God. And what is more, let us come knowing that we are encompassed by the host of invisible onlookers – great cloud of ancestors who continue to inspire, reassure, and cheer us as we struggle to actualize our common humanity and remain faithful to our common faith. We are a clan of Jesus!

Analysis of Sermon 4: A Sermon on Ecclesiology

Focus Statement

The church is a divine institution, a clan of Jesus consisting people of diverse culture and language who are bonded together by one heart, one soul, one baptism, one God, one

faith, and surrounded by the host of faithful ancestors for the purpose of loving and caring for each other and the world.

Function Statement

This sermon provides an ecclesiological paradigm that is amenable to Yoruba sociocultural frame of reference. This contextual understanding has the tendency of enabling the audience to better understand their relationship, connectedness, and responsibility to every Christian, especially those that differ from them.

Context and Contextualization

The sermon is crafted for a Worldwide Communion Service at Methodist Church Nigeria Bodija (MCN Bodija). Located at the heart of the cosmopolitan city of Ibadan, MCN Bodija is a multicultural, multiethnic, and intergenerational community. The church consists of some Igbos of eastern Nigeria, a few non-Nigerians, and a large percentage of different Yoruba subgroups. These features inform the clan metaphor I used in presenting the socially construed ecclesiology.

The clan metaphor grounds the sermon in context from the beginning. Without extensive exegesis of the biblical text, I allow the clan metaphor to be a frame around the picture that is painted in Acts 4: 32-34. This approach is expected to help the congregation to have another perspective of a church that bears on their sociocultural context. Clan is a cultural motif that the Yoruba could understand and identify with appropriately as it is relevant to their social sociopolitical setting. The sermon acknowledges the incongruence of this analogy to the church by pointing out that it is impossible to enter a clan unless one is born or adopted into it. But it addresses the problem by establishing Jesus Christ as the greatest ancestor and ground of the church clanship and baptism as its membership pass. This

resolves the issue of blood descent and acknowledges the unity of the church without overlooking the diversity of its members. Although the sermon uses a biblical text and few other scriptural references, these only serve as supporting warrants for the theme. The clan motif constitutes the hermeneutical key and the main thrust of the design and development.

The overriding goal of the sermon is to create an image of the church that is rooted in the local context. This, I believe, would help the congregation to name its sociocultural world in relation to its Christian context and thereby unify both. Not only could such a unifying worldview help to address the people's double consciousness it may also move them beyond ethnic and tribal particularities into knowing and accepting others as part of themselves.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The desire to make preaching more responsive, relevant, and effective to the Yoruba of Nigeria is the overriding concern of this project. This is necessary inasmuch as the type of Christianity planted and nurtured in Yorubaland appears not to correspond to the people's construction of reality and cultural expression. Not only does this dissonance challenge the relevance of Christianity, it makes it fashionable and acceptable for many professing Yoruba Christians to uphold traditional beliefs and practices simultaneously.

I argued throughout the project that Christianity would continue to be a social facade unless it addresses the immediate and existential needs of the Yoruba. This requires an appreciation of the context of the Yoruba, which I discussed in the first chapter. The brief anthropological analysis indicates that community and relationality is the central ethos of the Yoruba. The Yoruba are incurably religious and perceive things through the lens of community and existential relevance. Their religion focuses on issues such as the family, values and morality, interpersonal relationship and maintenance of cosmic balance, survival and overcoming misfortunes. This implies that preaching and indeed general ministry practices in Yorubaland would likely be more authentic when it relates to the immediate struggle of the people.

The history of preaching since the inception of Christianity to the present in Yorubaland indicates otherwise. With the possible exception of the Indigenous churches and some recent development in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, preaching practices have been antithetical to Yoruba culture and conceptual framework. Many preachers are dismissive of the people's culture on the ground that it is deficient or even demonic and

incapable of containing and expressing the sparks of divine revelation. But what many failed to realize is that “it is within the human culture that we find God’s revelation – not as a separate supracultural message but in the very complexity of culture itself, in the warp and woof of the human relationship.”¹ This relative lack of recognition of the role human experience and culture play in preaching may have contributed to the regrettable conflict between the Christian faith and lived experience of the Yoruba.²

In order to address this dilemma, I suggest a contextual preaching paradigm, which aims at integrating Christian thought and Yoruba worldview. I discussed the theological movement of contextualization and distilled its values for preaching. One basic assumption of contextual preaching that becomes obvious is that the closer one is to a context, the more effective and meaningful one is able to proclaim the gospel to the people. By acknowledging and using Yoruba thoughts and cultural gifts for the proclamation of the gospel, contextualization allows preaching to grow out of the people’s context. It maintains that given the critical role of preaching in the interpretation of reality, the gospel could be more effective when it embodies the ontology, metanarrative, and thought forms of the Yoruba. Rather than patronizing or being utterly dismissive of Yoruba tradition, as it is the case presently, any preacher that seeks to reach the subliminal consciousness of the Yoruba must genuinely and willingly take the people’s cultural and religious worldview very seriously.

¹ Bevens, 56.

² Max Warren recognizes this when in the preface to *Primal Vision*, he pleaded for humility, understanding, and appreciation of divine providence when approaching other people’s culture and religion. “When we approach the man of another faith than our own it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to him and what new understanding of grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter. Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, it to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.” See Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, 10.

This preaching approach requires at least three basic principles. The first principle is the interpretation of the preaching context. This entails immersion into the existential reality and conceptual framework of the audience, in this case, the Yoruba. The experiential immersion in context will not only provide information about the issues that are crucial to the people but also supply necessary tools for framing the gospel message in the language and communication forms appreciate and meaningful to the local culture.

The second principle is the interpretation of text and context. It must be noted that while the Scripture plays crucial role in contextual preaching, the exigencies, problems, and conceptual categories of the immediate audience constitute the hermeneutical keys. In order words, it may sometimes be helpful to acknowledge the original context of the Scripture but the preaching context provides the essential hermeneutical template for textual interpretation.

The third principle of contextual preaching is the harmonization of the text and the preaching context. Bearing in mind that the Scripture was written in a different time and to a different people other than our own, the preacher has to creatively negotiate the time and cultural differences. This creative negotiation of the sometimes radically opposed contexts requires relevant hermeneutical points of contact that will enable the hearers to appropriate the focus of the sermon in light of their historical context.

By way of integrating the theoretical component of the project, I presented and analyzed four contextual sermon samples. The sermon samples addressed issues such as community, sociocultural liberation, Christology, and ecclesiology that are pertinent to the Yoruba. Apart from drawing examples and illustrations from the rich culture of the people, each of the sermons embodied local frame of reference, thought patterns, language, and communication forms.

It cannot be overemphasized that contextualization in preaching allows preaching to evolve naturally from the context of a people without external encumbrances. While preachers are not in position to enforce the acceptance of the gospel, they have the responsibility to eliminate false barrier to the hearing of the message. Contextual preaching affirms the incarnation principle of Christian preaching and eschews pointless obstacles such as unintelligible theological terminology, obtuse sermon design, foreign images, and illustration.

Furthermore, the utilization of local elements in sermon making has the tendency of renewing the proclamation and hearing of the gospel. In the words of Tisdale, "As the pastor becomes more aware of the congregational subcultures, she or he becomes more aware of the ways in which the theology and art of the sermon can prohibit a genuine hearing of the gospel message."³ Familiarity with hearers' context will certainly enhance the preacher's creative ability to merge the horizons of text and context, and thereby stimulating fresh understanding of the gospel. By recognizing the value of human context the preachers would be able to proclaim appropriate and relevant message to the people.

While I do not by any means advocate for the replacement of Christian proclamation with Yoruba primal religion and culture, it might be helpful to express the Christian gospel through the religiocultural experience of the people. As the American missiologist, Richard Cote, points out, "there can be no Christian faith outside the world of human experience and culture. Faith is always appropriated as an experienced reality, both personally and culturally."⁴ Not only does this approach have the potential to harmonize the Christian gospel

³ Tisdale, 37.

⁴ Richard G. Cote. *Re-Visioning Mission: The Catholic Church and Culture in Postmodern America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 65.

and the existential reality of the Yoruba, it could also engender better apprehension of the gospel without damaging the traditional thinking pattern of the people. Needless to say the approach could also contribute to the ongoing efforts to cultivate a more relevant Christianity that would address the endemic polarity of Christian faith and lived experience of the Yoruba of Nigeria.

Finally, I acknowledge that this project has not covered all the features of contextualization in preaching given its limitation to the religiocultural context of the Yoruba. But insofar as it addresses itself to this aspect of Yoruba context, the project has contributed some insights to contextual approach to preaching. Further research that will utilize other aspects of the people's context needs to be carried out so as to foster holistic approach to preaching. This will eventually enable the Yoruba of Nigeria to fully embrace Christianity without rejecting their cultural heritage. One, therefore, hopes that this work will generate ideas and stimulate greater interest to this end.

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